THE MURDER ROOM

MARGARET YORKE

NO FURY

'Mistress of the skilfully spun suspense novel'

Sunday Telegraph

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An unknown woman, seen staring at the house where Marjorie and Robert Bretherton lived in the village of Haverbury, was to start a chain of events that upset their hitherto well-ordered lives.

Ruth Castle was a stranger, a proud and defiant individualist who was determined to rescue some personal happiness from the wreckage of her life at no matter what cost to others. Against her will, she developed a real friendship for Marjorie and was soon involved in the affairs of the rest of the Bretherton family who came to stay for Christmas: Robert's elderly parents, his brother Clive, and Clive's unpredictable fiancée, Sarah.

Marjorie and Ruth's characters were in sharp contrast to each other; their friendship grew as various family conflicts emerged, until one night when Marjorie, turning to Ruth for support in a sudden crisis, was forced to realise that things were not as straightforward as she had supposed—and that the whole security of her life was threatened…

No Fury

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Printed and bound in Great Britain at the University Printing House Oxford *Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.*

CONGREVE

Flash and Rory are drawn from life. Otherwise, all the characters, places and events in this story are imaginary.

1

She stood in the lane and stared at the house.

Marjorie Bretherton, screened by the bathroom curtains, in turn watched her, and wondered what she found so compelling. On this dull November day there was nothing remarkable to observe. The roses, which in summer festooned the brickwork, had died off; in the garden a few shrubs sagged sadly under a mantle of damp; and a litter of fallen leaves made a sodden blanket on the grass under the cherry tree which was stark now, but in spring a shower of pink.

Every window received its scrutiny: slow, considered, thorough. She was a woman of about Marjorie's own age, perhaps a little older, wearing dark slacks and a sheepskin coat whose bulk obscured her build. She was tall, and had a pale, rather thin face. A red scarf was tied over her hair, and her hands were thrust in her pockets. Marjorie watched her leave at last, evidently having absorbed to the full the fascination of Willerby House and its exterior. She strode away in the direction of the Post Office.

How odd to stare so blatantly, Marjorie thought, as she began the boring task of cleaning the basin. She had been about to open the window when her attention was caught by the stationary watcher outside; how long the vigil had lasted she had no idea, but it seemed a strange way in which to occupy time. Marjorie was often curious about what went on in other people's houses, and gazed at lighted windows seen from trains with the greatest interest, but she would never have halted deliberately to stare in so open a manner; it was too rude; she would have dissembled.

Perhaps the stranger thought there was no one at home to mind being watched. Marjorie continued to speculate as she rinsed the basin and poked ineffectually at the deposit of half-dissolved soap which had collected under the taps. Her cloth left a trail of moulted hairs over the porcelain. She sighed, rinsed again, and arranged nailbrush, soap and toothmug on the shelf. Her reflection in the mirror mimicked her movements. Her hair, once a deep auburn but now faded to a dull brown, stood untidily out round her face; her eyes, under fine, straight brows, were almost green. She had never thought much of her looks, and it was still a surprise that Robert felt otherwise. Thinking of him, she grinned at herself in the mirror, made a face at her image, gave the plug a pull for luck, and left the bathroom.

Downstairs, the rooms were tidy. It was a square, brick-built house, designed early in the century as a comfortable and unpretentious family home. There was a central hall, and doors led from it to the sitting-room and study in front, the kitchen and dining-room behind. There was some good furniture; the mahogany dining table and chairs had come from Robert's Chelsea flat. The large Paul Henry that hung over the fireplace was his too, purple heather and grey hills, with a whitewashed cottage by the side of a lake. It reminded Marjorie, each time she looked at it, of their honeymoon, when it rained every day. She had never been to Ireland before; most of her holidays had been spent in Switzerland, and it was on one of these annual skiing trips that she had met Robert. He had fallen heavily just ahead of her as she came swooping down a steep slope through some trees; when he did not immediately get to his feet she turned, reached him, and stopped in a flurry of snow to see what was wrong. No bones were broken, but he was winded. It was the reverse of the traditional romantic encounter, for she was the rescuer, not the rescued. Pink and glowing with health, brilliant in her bright green outfit, she stood over him as he struggled to his feet. He was grateful for her somewhat brisk concern; when she was certain that he was not really hurt, but only shaken, she left him to continue his slow descent, expertly turning and dipping ahead of him as he floundered clumsily down. They met constantly after that, and it was always Marjorie who had the advantage. Robert seemed to be for ever slowly putting on his skis, or taking them off, as she dashed past. She, sturdy and compact, was skilled and graceful; he, with his

large, heavy frame and small experience, was awkward and uncoordinated. He was intrigued because she excelled at this sport, which he found difficult; the assurance of her own ability gave her a confident sparkle which was attractive. They took to deserting both their parties in the evenings, and meeting to dance in various gay haunts after dinner.

Looking back, Marjorie still marvelled at the rapidity with which the situation had developed between them. Other men whom she had met in similar surroundings had proved to be dull, uninteresting, or just pompous, when translated back to England and drab worsted suits. But Robert was always able to converse amusingly; he was an excellent host who sought to please her, and he looked rather better in a dark suit than in beanie hat and red anorak, which merely made him appear comic. He worked for a rapidly expanding company, which made containers of all kinds for manufacturers and anyone else interested in boxes and packets. He had a high salary, a company car, and the mixed blessing of an expense account. Marjorie was the untrained teacher of the kindergarten form at a small school near Reigate. She spent most of her time amid raffia and basketwork and elementary treatises on the three R's. She was naturally patient with children, and easily won their respect and obedience. This compensated for her lack of documentary qualifications, but her salary was proportioned to this deficiency and not her competence. She owned a tiny cottage in the country a few miles from the school, and an old Ford in which she travelled back and forth. In the Christmas holidays she went to Switzerland; at Easter she gardened, and painted her cottage; and in the long summer holidays she supplemented her income by temporary work in varying capacities. She had been a hotel waitress, worked in a departmental store, cooked at a schoolboys' camp, and helped other women cope with unruly families and animals on farms and in seaside houses. Robert was entertained at first when he heard about these activities, but when Marjorie told him that she planned to be a hostess in a holiday camp the summer after they met, he frowned. She said the tips were good and there were plenty of perks', but he was not impressed. He came to see her at her cottage on Easter Saturday, and found her on a ladder painting the kitchen ceiling; there were blobs of white emulsion in her hair and on her nose. She was much less competent here than in the snow. He took the paintbrush from her, discarded the steps, for

he could reach the ceiling without their aid, and soon finished the job, making no mess at all. Then they went for a long walk over the surrounding fields, and it was here that the subject of holiday employment was discussed.

'I have to do something, Robert. It's different. It's all experience,' Marjorie said.

'It's not suitable,' Robert declared fustily.

She marched along beside him, a determined figure, still with splashes of paint in her hair.

'Why not?' she wanted to know.

There was something gallant and defiant about her. Not for the first time, he felt the urge to protect her as well as to dominate.

'You shouldn't be looking after other people's kids, you ought to have some of your own,' he heard himself say, to his own astonishment. 'Why don't we get married?'

There was not much moonlight and roses about this proposal, Marjorie thought wryly, but it solved the holiday problem without more argument for she did not need time to decide. Purposely, superstitiously, she had avoided thinking too much about Robert and the future; they had known each other so short a time, it was too soon for much to happen, and experience had taught her that anticipation often ended in disappointment. But when the words were said, a flood of delight swept over her, and in his arms she had no doubts.

They were married two weeks after her term ended. She retired from the school with a travelling clock from the staff and a weird assortment of traycloths, egg cosies and other products of their skill from the pupils. All that was last year: since then there had been London and Robert's flat. Time there had passed slowly. An excellent woman had done Robert's cleaning for years; she continued to do it now, so that there was no housework to occupy Marjorie during the day, and there was no garden to lure her. She went for long walks in the parks; she visited museums and picture galleries in an effort to repair some of the defects in her general education; she window-shopped, and went alone to the cinema. Often, in the evenings, Robert invited business friends to dine; at first she enjoyed these sedate parties, but some of the guests were so dull that she began to resent them as a waste of time and money.

It would be better to entertain people whose company both of them liked, but they had no mutual friends.

The weekends were different. Then, they went to Marjorie's cottage. Robert put up shelves, mended hinges, remade the guttering, and attended to everything that Marjorie had neglected. She restored the garden to a state of order it had not achieved for years, and cooked good plain meals of roast chicken or lamb, apple pie and baked custard, forgetting the prettied-up peppers, over-savouried rice and lush, liqueur-laden puddings which Robert required for the delectation of their London visitors. That year they did not go skiing; Robert had taken extra leave for the honeymoon, and could not ask for more so soon. Marjorie accepted this, but as wet January slid into dank February her thoughts turned more and more in the direction of high mountains and blue skies. Secretly she brooded over the advertisements of travel agents. Increasingly, more effort was needed to face the return from the cottage to London on Sunday nights, until at last she asked Robert if he would contemplate giving up the flat and becoming a commuter. It was perfectly possible: most of her former pupils' fathers did it daily. She might even return to school, part-time; and they would have more money with only one establishment to maintain.

'But we aren't short of money. You can manage, can't you?' Robert asked at once. 'I can give you more, you know.'

'It isn't that, darling. Of course I can manage, you're very generous. It's only that I do so hate living in London. I've nothing to do all day, and I'm really a country person.'

Robert was not surprised by this outburst. He had never intended them to live for ever in London, but he would not agree to commute from the cottage. It was pretty and quaint, adequate for weekends, but not big enough for a permanent home since there were only two small bedrooms and one living-room. He declared, too, that he wanted to live in a different locality. Marjorie stifled the unworthy suspicion that he did not want to live where she already had friends and he had none. She directed all her latent energy into house-hunting, made daily expeditions into Surrey, Hants, Herts and Bucks, and at weekends took Robert with her to see anything that seemed at all possible among these potential havens. They found Willerby House after going to see what on paper declared itself to be a charming home of distinction with exposed beams and rose-

garden, and was in fact a near-barn with rampant woodworm, set in a forest of briars.

'It would need thousands spent on it,' Robert said.

'But it's got character.'

Marjorie was learning. It was no use taking Robert to inspect bare modern houses with huge windows and planned space. He wanted atmosphere already provided.

'Too much of it. But I like this part of the world. What happens down that lane, I wonder?' Robert turned the car off the road along which they were driving through Haverbury village, a small, straggling place with a pub, a telephone kiosk and a nucleus of dwellings. They went past several small cottages and a Post Office. The trees were just coming into leaf, and the air was warm with the promise of spring. The pale sun emerged from behind a cloud as they came in sight of Willerby House. Square, built of brick, with a slate roof, it stood at the end of the lane with a board outside proclaiming that it was to be auctioned at an early date. Robert stopped the car. Without speaking, they got out and walked up to the house. It was obviously empty. There was a small lawn in front, with a cherry tree in bud hanging its branches over the fence. A purple lilac, almost in bloom, grew further back; daffodils, now over, stood in the grass, and bright wallflowers were bunched in beds under the windows. The garden continued round the sides of the house, which was centrally placed on its plot of land. Not normally fanciful, Marjorie suddenly felt a surge of anticipation, and knew that they would live here. She took Robert's hand, and they walked together up the path. Still silent, they peered through the lower windows at the bare rooms, all square and well-proportioned.

'The Post Office people might know who has the key.' Marjorie, the countrywoman, broke the silence.

'Yes.' Robert looked at her. A sense of excitement caught them both, and he gripped her fingers tightly.

'It may be hopeless upstairs,' she said quickly, fearing disillusion.

'It looks solid.'

The Post Office did know about the key. They were directed to Mrs Birdupp, who lived in a council house near the church and who used to clean Willerby House for the family who had lived there

until they emigrated to Australia.

'The house was sold, then something went wrong. This credit squeeze business, I suppose. Anyway, it fell through,' Mrs Birdupp told them.

'It's been empty all winter?'

'Yes, but it isn't damp. I've lit fires, but there was no real need. Very sound, it is,' declared Mrs Birdupp.

She was right. There was no trace of damp inside. It had been built at a time when houses were solidly constructed and workmanship was good. Since the house was no older than the century, a damp course was included and could plainly be seen. The building stood on a slight rise, so that the rain must wash past, without menace of flood. There were pale marks on the walls where pictures had hung, or where large pieces of furniture had stood, and the paintwork was chipped and dirty, but the plaster was firm wherever Robert tapped it and the floors were smooth and strong. The four bedrooms were as pleasant as the rooms downstairs.

'One could build on a nursery and another bathroom in time,' Robert said, standing in what he already saw as his dressing-room. He pictured his ivory-backed brushes on his handsome mahogany bow-fronted chest of drawers near the window. He could gaze across fields to the distant hills from here.

'We could grow strawberries.' Marjorie had opened the window and was hanging out over the sill, inhaling the April air and observing the spinach beet, shot to seed, luxuriating in the vegetable garden.

Robert came behind her and put his hands on her waist.

'Don't fall out.'

He drew her back against him. Her hair brushed his face.

'I'll get on to the agent on Monday. They may very well agree to a quick sale before the auction,' he said. 'We must get a surveyor to see it, but I'll be surprised if there's much wrong. It seems to be in very good nick.'

The surveyor agreed with this verdict, and a month later they moved in, with professional aid to paint the drawing-room and their bedroom, but determined to spend the summer completing the decorating themselves. Now, after six months, the house was finished inside, painted white everywhere, with new red velvet

curtains in the dining-room and the gold brocade from Robert's flat altered to fit the drawing-room windows. Marjorie had made her strawberry bed, and rescued from disorder a patch of overgrown raspberry canes already in the garden. Robert had cut the hedges and trimmed the shrubs. Mrs Birdupp came to clean three times a week, and they had acquired a black labrador dog called Rory.

As Marjorie came down the stairs, Rory got up from the floor of the hall where he had been lying. His tail wagged to and fro with pleasure at the sight of her, and his lip lifted in a sniffing grin of welcome.

'Hi, Rory, ready for a walk?'

Now that the painting and hard gardening were over, Marjorie was glad to have Rory as an excuse for taking long walks. She had always been active, and needed an outlet for her physical energy. Every day they trudged for miles across the fields and through the woods. With the house organised Robert had begun to invite his friends down at weekends; this replaced the dinner parties that distance now made impossible. Marjorie found the visits a strain; she escaped from the somnolence of Sunday afternoons by striding off with Rory, and only rarely was she accompanied by a guest, for few were energetic.

Now the dog circled round her, gently tugging at her skirt as if to make her hurry.

'All right, boy, I'm coming.'

She pulled his ear gently, and went to fetch her duffle jacket from the cloakroom. She should really be cleaning the silver, for Robert's chairman and his wife, no less, were due next weekend; tomorrow would have to be spent shopping and cooking in preparation for this major event; but she felt restless, and though it was a dull, grey day, it was not yet raining, so she would go out now and postpone the chores till later. She slid her feet into short rubber boots, and, followed by Rory, went out through the back door.

They walked rapidly up the road, Marjorie with quick, brisk steps, and Rory with a loping stride at her side. There was no one about; the children were at school, the men were at work, and the women, with the exception of Marjorie, probably busy. The summer had been too much occupied by all the work of moving for either

Robert or Marjorie to feel the need for outside contacts, and for some of the time many of the local residents had been on holiday. Now it was a stagnant period socially, the lull after summer and before the start of Christmas gatherings. Marjorie was on nodding terms with one or two people, and sometimes she met other women out exercising dogs. Some days at teatime she saw small cars dash through the village crammed with children coming back from school. Mrs Birdupp had told her the names of most of her neighbours, but several of the cottages were used only at weekends and their owners had no time or inclination for fraternising. Marjorie had not admitted to herself that she was almost as lonely now as she had been in London. Things were better here, for there were good walks to be found, and she had Rory. In time there would be friends, and in time there would be children. Meanwhile it was stupid to keep thinking that it was still only November, with all the bleakness of the winter yet to come.

She rounded the bend, and at once saw what constituted a diversion in the quiet tenor of Haverbury life. A furniture van was parked outside one of the small cottages on the green. Two men were unloading a small, brocade-covered sofa from it; more furniture was packed within, waiting for release, and a few chairs stood casually about in the damp air. As Marjorie approached, taking in every detail but trying to appear as if she were not the least bit interested in case anyone should notice her, someone came out of the cottage and stood watching the men bring their burden to the door.

'In the front room with that, please.'

It was a clear, incisive voice, and it belonged to the woman who had, earlier that morning, spent so many minutes silently staring at Willerby House.

2

Ruth made the third pot of tea in as many hours, filled large mugs to the brim, spooned in sugar generously, and carried the results out to the removal men, who had finished unloading the van and were now packing up their bits of blanket and webbing. Although the day had been misty and damp, no rain had fallen and her possessions were not drenched.

The cottage was pleasant. She looked round the sitting-room, into which the front door opened, and was satisfied with what she saw. A big, old-fashioned fireplace with a beam above it almost filled one wall; the sofa which Marjorie had observed earlier was now placed at one side of it. There was a large armchair, a small oak desk, a gate-legged table and some plain chairs with rush seats, all familiar parts of Ruth's life, things that she had collected through the years; and it was good to be using them again after their spell in store. Already she felt at home in these new surroundings. She had no curtains yet, but they were ordered and would soon be ready; meanwhile she would cover the windows with old ones, drawing-pinned if need be, when darkness fell. The room needed painting; the walls were drab and peeling; but she would probably be able to find some local man to do it for her in his spare time. When the removal men had gone she would go to the Post Office and make some enquiries; the sooner such problems were tackled, the better. She lit a cigarette and then went out to hasten the men's departure.

They had finished their tea and closed up their van. Now they required her to sign a form declaring that the move had been satisfactorily accomplished. She made a note that they had broken a

cup and scratched a chair; then she signed, tipped them, and said goodbye. Back in the cottage again, she heard the lorry start up, and move lumberingly away up the road.

She was alone in her small empire.

When she had seen the cottage advertised for sale, Ruth felt it to be fate working for her. She had inspected it at once, found it suitable and sound enough, and then walked round the village on a trip of exploration. It was a chance not to be missed, and she took it. The next stage was to dig herself in, make everything as comfortable as she could, and herself secure. There was no hurry.

From the window she looked across the green to some other cottages which faced her. Down to the right, the lane led away to Willerby House. Up the hill was the Post Office and the road that led into town. Today it was all dismal; but in summer the cottages would be covered in roses, the grass would be green and the flower beds bright. Ruth was no gardener, but she could mow and might tackle window boxes, if no more. She must seem to conform.

She took the removal men's dirty mugs into the kitchen. Dusty china and glasses stood on the table and the cupboard top, unpacked by the men and now needing a wash before being put away. It would be quite a task. She had lit the boiler, but it was reluctant to draw and the water was still cold. It was no use tackling the washing yet. She decided to go at once on a search for someone to paint, and also for a woman to clean, for her own daily journey to London would leave her with very little time for domestic chores. How long would it take, she wondered, to accomplish what she had come here to do?

Ruth put on her coat, tied a scarf round her head, and went out. The air was very damp and the skies overhead were leaden; there was barely any wind. She had not expected the van to be unloaded so quickly; the men had been efficient. It was only half-past twelve. There was satisfaction in closing her own front door behind her, and for an instant she glanced back at Rose Cottage with real pride of ownership. It might be less civilised and laboursaving than a London flat, but there were compensations. She walked off up the hill with her hands thrust deep into her coat pockets.

The Post Office conducted its business in the front room of a modern bungalow in the middle of Haverbury village. Ruth had been in there on a previous visit, before she bought the cottage. It

was managed by a plump, brisk woman with unnaturally dark hair, a number of clattering bracelets on each arm, and dangling earrings. In addition to being the postmistress, Mrs Ganford was also the haberdasher, cosmetician and stationer. Birthday cards, knitting wool, cottons and eyeshadow were all displayed among her wares. When Ruth came into the shop there were no other customers. She bought some stamps, and then, as she picked up her change, approached the real reason for her visit without seeming to notice the interested scrutiny she was getting from behind the counter.

I've just moved into Rose Cottage down on the green, and I wondered if you knew of anyone who might do some painting for me, and perhaps a woman to clean once or twice a week? I have to go to London every day, and I need some help. I work at the B.B.C.'

Ruth was sure that this would be a recommendation, and it was. Mrs Ganford leaned forward eagerly.

'In television. Behind the scenes,' Ruth added.

'Well, now.' Mrs Ganford would not be easily won. She knew a good deal about Ruth already, her name, for instance, and what she had paid for the cottage. But now she tried to assess her.

'I expect it's difficult,' Ruth prompted.

'You could try Mrs Birdupp, I suppose,' Mrs Ganford allowed at last. 'And him, too.'

'Mrs Birdupp?'

'Bill Birdupp did some work for Mr Bretherton, and she works there, always has, regular. It makes a difference.' Mrs Ganford was clearly musing aloud. Ruth waited.

'Well, there's no harm in asking, is there?' Mrs Ganford decided at last. 'They live in the council houses by the church, number eleven. He'll be off at the quarry now, but she'll be at home. She doesn't go to Mrs Bretherton today. She only goes there three times a week, so she might help you out.'

'Thank you. I'll go and see,' said Ruth. She smiled, and her rather severe face altered at once, making Mrs Ganford glad that she had been helpful.

'It's no trouble,' she said, with truth.

Ruth left, with her stamps. She walked on up the hill, turned to

the left and then went past the line of brick council houses that straggled down towards the church. Number eleven had neat print curtains in the window framing a row of geraniums in pots. The garden was tidy; all the plants had been trimmed and the beds dug.

'Why not?' Ruth thought. She pushed the gate open and walked up the path.

The door was soon opened after her' knock. Mrs Birdupp was a small, spare woman with grey hair and spectacles, older than Ruth had expected. She explained the reason for her call, saying that Mrs Ganford had advised her to come and mentioning both cleaning and painting, for she wanted the whole position clear.

'Won't you come inside, Mrs Castle?' Mrs Birdupp stood back to let Ruth into the house, and she knew that her mission would meet with some degree of success. She stepped into the hall, and Mrs Birdupp closed the door.

'Why warm the outdoor air is what I say/ Mrs Birdupp remarked. 'Well now, I go to Mrs Bretherton on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, you see,' she went on. 'I've always looked after Willerby House, ever since old Mrs Weston's time and that was before the war.'

'I understand. Of course, I wouldn't want to interfere with Mrs Bretherton's arrangements,' Ruth said. It was the first time she had spoken that name. 'One morning a week would be enough for me. The cottage is very small, and I'm alone. But I go up to London every day, or nearly every day, and I will need help.'

'Of course you will. Travelling up to London? Well, fancy.'

Ruth decided to let her find out the reason for this by consulting Mrs Ganford, rather than again revealing the nature of her work. More fun for them, she thought.

'I'm tired of the smog, so I decided to move,' she said.

'I don't blame you. Well, seeing that it would only be one morning, I think I could spare you that,' said Mrs Birdupp. 'It would have to be Tuesday or Thursday.'

'Let's make it Thursday,' said Ruth promptly, 'then I'll be straight for the weekend. Can you start next week?'

It was agreed. They discussed payment, and Ruth settled for the rate paid by Mrs Bretherton.

‘And I’ll ask Bill about the painting and let you know,’ Mrs Birdupp promised. ‘Is there much? Perhaps he’d better come and see you.’

‘That might be best. There’s the sitting-room and my bedroom. I want those done as soon as possible. There’s less hurry for the rest.’

‘I’ll talk to him,’ said Mrs Birdupp.

Ruth whistled under her breath as she walked away. Everything had been easy so far. Was it an omen? Would all her plans take shape with as little trouble? She felt calm. Despair and doubt belonged to the past, and must be left there, banished. Adapting to country life might well be the hardest part of what lay ahead, but already she was enjoying it, and this was unexpected. Perhaps her feeling of lightness was due only to relief that at last she was taking action. She walked on; certainly she would be healthy in this existence, and what if it snowed? Then life would, indeed, be rugged.

As she crossed the green, nearing her cottage, a figure approached from the other direction, with a dog running ahead. Ruth’s path was bound to meet that of the other walker, and she recognised the woman with the black labrador who had passed earlier and tried not to stare obviously at the removal van. Soon she would know a lot about her, and about all her neighbours. Ruth meant to become part of the village, even though she must leave it for many hours each week.

‘Good morning,’ she said to the strange young woman, as soon as they were near enough. She smiled. Rory came inquisitively up to her and she stooped to pat him.

‘Good morning.’

Marjorie looked wary. She, too, had realised the inevitability of their meeting when she saw Ruth, but until then she had not reckoned on a face-to-face encounter with her new neighbour so soon.

‘What a nice dog. What’s his name?’

Marjorie told her, and Ruth made a fuss of the dog, pulling his ears gently and patting him, a task made easier because he possessed a very sentimental disposition, like most labradors, and loved to be made much of.

‘Don’t let him be a nuisance. He’s the most sloppy old thing

imaginable,' Marjorie said.

'He's muddy. Have you been for a long walk?'

'Yes, we went over the fields to the river, and it was wetter than I expected,' said Marjorie. She hesitated, and then said, 'Haven't you just moved into Rose Cottage? I noticed the van there this morning.' She did not add, and I saw you staring at my house far more rudely than I stared at yours, but you couldn't see me because I was hidden by my bathroom curtain.

'Yes, indeed. Wasn't I lucky to have a day that was dry, at this time of the year?'

Marjorie thought of the boiled egg she was about to eat in solitude. She was lonely, and rather bored; she remembered, too, the confusion and difficulty of the first days in Willerby House. Here was a woman of her own age who appeared to be alone and who must certainly have problems at home.

'Have you got any lunch? You can't be organised yet, are you? We only came here a few months ago and I know what it's like—cups of tea all day long and not much else. Will you come and have an egg or something with me?' Because she felt shy, the words came hurtling out.

Ruth was moved. It was kind, and she did not notice the slight desperation in the voice that uttered the invitation.

'Thank you very much, I'd love it,' she said, without hesitation. 'I've got no hot water, and all my china and glass is sitting in chaos and shavings waiting to be washed. I'd forgotten about food.'

It was true. There were a few tins and some gin, but she had given no thought to bread or milk. She had lived in town so long that she had not remembered country villages lacked milk machines and rarely boasted bakers.

'Oh, well, then I'm glad we met,' said Marjorie with more confidence. 'Come on. At least our house is warm now, you can wash, or have a bath if you like.' She strode on, eager to be hospitable. 'It's not far, just down here past your cottage.' Energetically she stepped out and Ruth fell in beside her. How friendly the natives of Haverbury all appeared to be.

'My husband goes up to London every day, so I'm on my own,' Marjorie was chattering on. 'I just have an egg or something for lunch, and we have a proper meal at night. Have you a family?'

‘No. I’m divorced and my children are with their father in Canada,’ said Ruth. She had always found it good policy to expose the basic facts instantly to new acquaintances.

‘Oh, how awful. I am so sorry!’ Marjorie was aghast at her own tactlessness, but how could she have known?

‘Don’t worry. It’s all ages ago now,’ said Ruth. She was used to this reaction. ‘I find it’s best to tell people. I hadn’t got any money, when my marriage broke up, and as he was going to Canada anyway I didn’t think my husband would provide much. I couldn’t have looked after the children properly. He had a good job out there, and I decided they’d have a better chance with him. He’s married again. They’re all right.’

It was so bleak.

‘How awful for you. Not to see them, I mean,’ said Marjorie. ‘How brave you were to let them go.’

‘Most people think me highly unnatural for doing it,’ said Ruth. Her new friend seemed to be perceptive. For a moment the memory of that sheer desolation when the children left swept over her again. ‘Of course it was hell at the time. But I knew it was the best thing. I’ll see them again one day.’

‘Well, I think you’re very brave,’ Marjorie repeated. ‘This way.’

She turned down the lane that led to Willerby House, unaware, in her haste, that her companion paused for a moment before following.

‘This is where we live. It’s a nice house and I’m very fond of it already,’ Marjorie said. She had a mad impulse to add, I hope you thought it nice when you inspected it this morning, but she kept silent. Seen from the road, the house looked deserted. The garage doors stood open, revealing its emptiness. An onlooker could be forgiven for thinking everyone was out, as now indeed they were.

But Ruth had been in no brown study, gazing without seeing what she watched; her scrutiny had been intense, minute.

However, the house soon came to life as Rory bounded up to the back door, his tail waving. He stopped once or twice to see if they followed, and Marjorie laughed at him.

‘You baby, we’re coming,’ she called, and hurried to open the door, which to Robert’s disapproval she never locked during the day when she went out.

‘Come in,’ she said to Ruth. ‘Welcome.’

Ruth walked slowly after her into the warm kitchen. A modern boiler stood in the corner. There was an Aga cooker with a kettle singing on the top. An old-fashioned dresser with blue and white striped jugs and jars arranged on its shelves filled one wall, and there was a large table with a red formica top in the middle of the room.

Ruth had to say something.

‘I’m to share the good offices of Mrs Birdupp with you,’ she said. ‘I hope you won’t mind. It was fixed this morning.’ She looked at Marjorie steadily, and the expression on her face was puzzling to her hostess. There could be no reason for her to appear compassionate and yet mocking, but that was how Ruth seemed as she said slowly, ‘You are Mrs Bretherton, of course?’

3

The ease with which he had settled down to the life of a married man was still a matter for surprise to Robert Bretherton. He was ambitious, and his youth had been spent first in pursuit, and then in consolidation, of the position he now held. After Oxford and a training in accountancy he had climbed swiftly. Nothing was too difficult for him to tackle, or too much trouble to undertake. His pertinacity won many new customers for his firm, and he kept his emotional life uncluttered so that there were no distractions. The various relationships he had with women before he met Marjorie seldom went deep; only once had he been tempted towards permanence before that meeting on the sunny mountain. There was something about Marjorie which touched him deeply; it became typified for him in the contrast between her skill and confidence on skis, and her unsophisticated life in Sussex with her well-stocked garden and the children's raffia work festooning the sitting-room. When he returned to London after that holiday he had not at first planned to pursue the friendship. Like Marjorie, he knew that holiday romances often lost their charm away from their original environment. But he found that she was constantly in his mind; even when he was busiest, her image rose up in his imagination to haunt him. This could not be allowed; the situation must therefore be developed until some sort of conclusion was reached, but Robert did not mean it to be resolved by marriage. Marjorie was not a young girl; she must have known other men; she would never expect him to be serious. But soon, a little to his own dismay, Robert found himself involved. Whether it was her lack of artifice, or her occasional helplessness, or the memory of the one sphere in

which there was no doubt that she excelled, he did not know. But he became increasingly eager to see her, increasingly reluctant to part from her, increasingly concerned about all that she did. He took her to theatres, and to dine in intimate restaurants. Her unusual colouring, with the green eyes and the hair that in its brighter youth had earned the nickname 'Carrots', was very attractive to Robert; she dressed well, within the limits imposed by her modest income, in unfussy clothes and plain colours, blue or brown or green; and he admired the way she managed her cottage, keeping it repaired and herself fed from the garden. He thought her vacation jobs enterprising, until she described a prospective post in a holiday camp. This he saw instantly as a reflection on himself; had she been so occupied when he met her, he would never have wanted to know her better. It was not suitable: she was no student in search of experience. Suddenly, standing in her garden, he had a vision of her as she ought to be, running a comfortable, if small, country house, taking the children to school and back in a mini car, and presiding over sedate dinner parties with her hair freshly set and wearing a becoming but subdued expensive dress. He could transform this vision into reality for her. Did she know anyone else who was in a position to do as much? He doubted it. He did not know if she had many men friends; she was no green girl, so there must have been some, but he had met no rivals at the cottage and no one in the Swiss party had seemed particularly important to her. The thought that there might be someone whom she saw as often as himself was sharply distasteful to Robert. He rarely acted without thorough premeditation, but his decision to marry Marjorie was a sudden one.

He discovered that she loved him, and was deeply stirred by the intensity of the emotion that was now released in her. She was tender and ardent, and she glowed in her response to him. Robert determined that their marriage should succeed. He knew that she was not happy in London, although her shyness with his friends was a surprise. In her changed surroundings she needed constant reassurance that her powers as a hostess were adequate. Robert had much on his mind: he was hoping to be appointed to the board of his company, and marriage had accelerated his chances for his superiors were pleased that he had plunged at last, and suitably. Marjorie must accept her responsibilities and support him. In fairness, he knew she tried, but her nature was uncomplicated and

she did not like the formula of ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’. She liked the rare evenings spent alone with Robert, not formally dressed for some dull dinner or attempting to impress guests whom she never wished to meet again. Work, in her view, should be left at the office.

Robert constantly reminded himself that she had run her own life singlehanded and successfully for years; it was probably harder for her to alter now than it was for him. With his appointment to the board it became tactically, as well as financially, prudent to move out to the country. He hoped that this would put things right for Marjorie; her new town pallor would go with the resumption of outdoor activities. If only the child they both hoped for would come, things would improve. He knew that already she was anxious, though he would admit no fears yet. She would be happier if she could develop a life of her own during the week. It seemed that Haverbury was less friendly than they had hoped, but the first months in the village had been so busy, with both of them working hard all the time at weekends and in the evenings getting the house straight, that neither had wanted the bother of outside claims. Now the long winter was beginning, and with its arrival Marjorie had too much leisure. Rory had been an inspiration: Mrs Birdupp had produced him, a two-year old dog who had belonged to the previous owners of Willerby House. They had not wanted to take him abroad with them, and Mrs Birdupp had promised to find him a good home, then weakened and kept him herself. When Robert and Marjorie moved, he began to spend all his time with them, escaping from Mrs Birdupp and going back to where he had lived before, until he forced the situation upon them. He had soon endeared himself to his new owners and transferred all his allegiance from Mrs Birdupp to them.

Driving home, Robert thought that perhaps it would be a good idea if they went to Switzerland after Christmas. He could afford it, in spite of the new house, for his improved position brought a sharp increase of income; and he could take the time off now instead of in the summer. He knew that Marjorie had missed her annual break the winter before, and he would not admit to himself that one of his reasons for not wanting to take her was because he must, in this sphere, recognise her advantage over him. He tried to picture her as he had first seen her, flushed, triumphant, and confident. She rarely had that look now; it had captivated him, and he felt an urge to

recreate it if he could. He resolved to suggest the holiday after dinner, and watch her reaction. He was sure that she would be up in the attic hauling out her skis before he had finished speaking.

It was raining now; a fine drizzle had begun to fall before he left London, and it continued all the way out from the station to Haverbury. Robert peered past the sweeping screen-wipers at the ribbon of road ahead; by this time it was very familiar and he knew the bends and dangerous spots by heart. The village seemed peaceful as he passed the Post Office and took the turning down to Willerby House. His headlights showed two youths with long hair and leather jackets lounging at the busstop, presumably waiting for transport to town and the cinema, but otherwise there was no one to be seen. A few cars were parked outside The Crown, but it was too early for the pub to be really busy. Lights burned in the cottage windows; people were at home now after the day's work. Robert turned in at the gate of Willerby House and drove straight into the garage. He revved the engine and switched off, then got rather stiffly out of the car and picked up his briefcase. A bath was what he most desired now. As he was closing the garage, the back door opened and a shaft of light fell across the gravel. Rory came out, snuffling and wagging his tail in welcome.

'Darling, is that you? You're early.' Marjorie was standing in the doorway.

'Why, are you expecting anyone else? Of course it's me,' said Robert, coming into the house. He put his arms round her, laughing, and they kissed.

'You're damp, what a foul night,' she said. 'Take off your coat, quick.'

His face was cold, and his hair was misted with raindrops. Marjorie helped him remove his overcoat, and hung it near the boiler to dry. Rory circled round them both, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

'Mm, what a good smell. What's for dinner?' Robert asked, bending to pat the dog.

'It's only shepherd's pie—the remains of the joint,' she answered.

'Good, that means you can come and talk to me because it won't need stirring,' said Robert, putting his arm round her waist.

'Wrong again. We're having a souffle for pudding, I want to try

out a new kind, and I've got to mix it,' she said. 'Anyway, darling, aren't you going to plunge straight into the bath like you usually do?'

'I won't if you'll come and talk to me instead. Or better still—'he broke off, and began to kiss her round her neck and behind the ears. 'You look very bewitching tonight, what have you been up to?' It was true; her face was animated and her eyes shone. She had put on a blue wool dress and taken trouble with her makeup. The air of apathy that had been part of her for some time now had vanished. His tiredness dropped away as he held her closely against him. It was good to come home to this: how could he have clung for so long to the aim of remaining a bachelor?

'I've had a very nice afternoon, but you don't want to hear about it now, you want your bath,' Marjorie said. She kissed his nose.

'You come upstairs too,' said Robert. He ran his hand along her spine.

'No, I won't be tempted,' she said. 'I must do the souffle.' She pushed him away and began to clatter among the bowls and dishes on the table.

'Banished, am I?'

'You are.'

Robert laughed.

'Very well, but just you wait,' he said.

He went upstairs, whistling, his fatigue gone. Marjorie stood for a moment among her preparations, forgetting what she had planned to do; her impulse was to follow him. They could always eat tinned peaches. But she had already parted the yolks from the whites of two eggs and combined some other ingredients; they were no longer newlyweds; she had better stick to the job in hand.

In fact, they were eating the successful result of her efforts before Robert heard how she had spent her day, for Marjorie insisted that first he should describe his.

'How did the board meeting go? Where did you have lunch? And what then?' she wanted to know.

He told her as much as he felt would satisfy her. She knew most of his fellow directors, and had a poor opinion of the roundabout way in which many mighty decisions seemed to be reached.

‘Now you. This is delicious, by the way,’ said Robert, brandishing a fork loaded with apricot soufflé.

‘It is good, isn’t it?’ She looked smug.

If only she could always be like this, gay and alive, he thought. For a moment a wild hope came to him: she was pregnant and had been to the doctor for confirmation; this was her news. It would explain her high spirits. He waited for the revelation.

‘Go on, eat up, or it will all collapse,’ said Marjorie. She chased the last fragments of her own helping round the edges of her plate. Then she went on, ‘You know Rose Cottage up on the green? It’s been empty for some time’

‘Yes. Some woman’s bought it, hasn’t she?’ Robert switched his mind away from babies. If there was a connection between Rose Cottage and pregnancy it must be remote.

‘How did you know?’ Marjorie thought her story was about to fall flat.

‘Oh, I heard it in the pub when I went up for some beer last week. It’s someone who works at the B.B.C., isn’t it? Woman’s Hour or something?’

‘You do know a lot,’ said Marjorie. ‘Yes, she does work at the B.B.C., but not on Woman’s Hour. It’s television, and all behind the scenes. She has something to do with producing documentaries, she does research and stuff. She’s just been in America doing a series about drugs and things.’

She had all Robert’s attention now. He looked at her intently, his soufflé forgotten.

‘Well?’

‘She moved in today. I happened to pass the cottage with Rory while the furniture was being unloaded,’ Marjorie said. She was going to tell Robert how she had seen Ruth earlier, staring at the house with so much intensity when she thought herself unobserved, but something made her keep this back. Ruth herself had not referred to the incident. She could so easily have said, ‘I walked down to your house this morning while I waited for the removal van and had a good stare,’ but she had not. There could be no sinister reason for her reticence; perhaps she was merely ashamed of being curious, and confident that she had not been seen.

‘Then, later, when we were coming back from our walk, I met

her again. She'd been to see Mrs Birdupp about helping in the house, and getting Bill to do some painting for her.'

'She's not going to steal Mrs B. from us, I hope,' said Robert. This was a safe remark to make while he waited for the rest of Marjorie's story.

'No, she only wants her once a week, it won't interfere with us. Oh, Robert, it's so sad. She's got two children but they're in Canada. She's divorced. I felt so sorry for her. We take our own good luck so much for granted, what dreadful things can happen.' Marjorie enlarged upon Ruth's circumstances, telling him what she had learned herself. Ruth had tried to see her children on her visit to America, but their father had not allowed her to meet them, though she was only a few hundred miles from them at one time. Not wanting to upset the children, she had accepted it and simply told Marjorie her turn would come.

Robert was silently screaming at her to get on, to finish her story and to tell him the name of the newcomer.

'Well, anyway, of course she hadn't got any food in the house,' Marjorie picked up her tale. 'So I asked her here and we had scrambled eggs, and then I went back with her and helped her wash all her china and glass and put it away. She's got some lovely things. It was fun. She's very nice.'

'Haven't you done enough china-washing and sorting here to last you for years?' Robert asked.

'Don't be such a grouch, darling. I was glad to help. It must be depressing, doing it all on one's own. I've asked her to dinner tomorrow. Poor thing, she's only got till the end of the week and then she has to go back to work. Her cooker hasn't arrived, and the chimney smokes. She's got a lot to cope with,' said Marjorie.

'Birdupp will help her. Why get involved?' said Robert. 'You'll be painting her cottage next.'

'Well, why not, if she can't manage? I've nothing else to do all day,' Marjorie burst out, exasperated. 'You won't let me get a job, when they're crying out for teachers and I'd easily get a part-time one. The least I can do is help a neighbour who's less fortunate than I am.'

'Darling, cool down. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to needle you,' said Robert, trying to seem calm. 'I just don't want this woman to take

advantage of you.'

'You haven't even met her yet, don't condemn her first,' cried Marjorie. 'She was very grateful, and she didn't want to come to dinner tomorrow, but I insisted. At least we can give her a few meals while she gets straight, and baths and things. Her boiler doesn't seem to be very good and she'll probably have to get a new one. You ought to be glad that I've found a friend, she's about my age, perhaps a few years older. What on earth's got into you?'

'Nothing. Of course I'm glad you've found someone you like,' said Robert. 'Though I don't suppose you'll see much of her if she's at work all week. What did you say her name was?'

'I didn't,' said Marjorie. 'And she does have days when she stays at home, correcting scripts and things, between programmes.'

'Marjorie, I'm not going to quarrel with you about some wretched female who's making use of you,'

Robert said. 'But will you please tell me her name?'

'I'm not quarrelling. And she's not making use of me. Good God, I believe you're jealous!' Marjorie stared at him. 'Robert, what sort of mind have you got? I tell you, she's been married and she's got two children.'

'That proves nothing,' said Robert. He wondered how the conversation had got off the rails in this way. He felt rather sick, and Marjorie was looking at him as if he were someone she had never seen before.

'I thought you'd be glad about this, or I wouldn't have told you,' she said, her anger dropping away. A great weariness suddenly swept over her. She got up and began to clear away the plates.

'Of course I'm glad. I'm delighted you've found a friend, if in fact she turns out to be one,' Robert said. 'But I won't have anyone taking advantage of your good nature, that's all.' He came behind her and put his arms round her. For the first time, she moved away, pushing his hands off.

'Don't worry, you won't suffer,' she said icily. 'I'll get the coffee.'

She went into the kitchen, leaving Robert alone. His mouth was dry. He still had not learned the name of the newcomer, and he must know it at once, but he could not ask Marjorie again. There was one way to find out.

‘Don’t bother about coffee for me,’ he called. ‘Since my company is so distasteful to you, I’m going up to The Crown for a drink.’

He was gone from the house before Marjorie could reply. She heard the front door bang behind him. Angry tears filled her eyes as she cleared away the meal and began to wash up. It was so trivial to quarrel for such a stupid reason, a pile of heaped misunderstandings. She would not have expected Robert to resent her friendships. Then she remembered how anxious he had been to live away from Sussex and all her former associations. What, in fact, did she really know about him? They had met only two years before. Their lives had been very different; they had no mutual friends. She knew nothing of any former loves or mistresses Robert might have had; both had declared such matters unimportant, and on Marjorie’s side there was little to conceal. She thought she knew and understood him, but it was clear to her now that she did not.

Tonight he had revealed the nature of a stranger.

4

Ruth heard footsteps. She had unpacked her books and oddments, and was putting away her clothes. An enormous spider suddenly scurried from behind a beam in the bedroom wall and stood motionless. Its legs were immensely long and its body huge as it surveyed the scene and decided upon its next move. Ruth picked up a glass in which she had brought a large gin and tonic upstairs; she finished her drink and then covered the spider, slid a piece of tissue paper over the end of the tumbler and held the menace captive. She was too superstitious to kill it, so there was only one thing to do with it; she carried it in its prison to the window, opened the casement and cast the intruder into the night. No doubt it would return by way of the bath plug, but at least it was gone for the moment. She liked neither mice nor spiders, and was unused to either; probably an old cottage like this was a haven for them and she might have to get a cat. A Siamese one would be an appropriate accessory for her to acquire. Musing, she lingered at the open window. It was not a cold night, and though it was wet, the rain did not blow into the room. The village stretched away around her: what dramas might be happening behind those shut doors. Just down the lane was Willerby House, and inside, Robert and Marjorie. A shutter came down in her mind when she thought of them; for an instant she panicked. What had she been thinking of, coming here like this? And tomorrow they would encounter each other. There could be no postponement of the moment, for Marjorie had insisted. How would he react? What would happen?

Ruth shook herself. It was her purpose to see him. There had been no reply to the letter she had written after the news of his

impending marriage, and when she had called at his flat, he had been out. Then, she had thought that friendly congratulations offered in a controlled and civilised way might create a response, but it had not happened. He had married a woman about whom she knew nothing, and vanished from her own life without a sign. After so many years, the humiliation was agony and the loneliness profound. She plunged into her work with an effort, and into desperate social competition. A new romance occupied her briefly, until in a moment of clarity she was suddenly appalled. Her right place was in Robert's arms, not in the embrace of this stranger with his balding head and incipient paunch, and a wife and two children in Kent. If she felt this, must not Robert too, temporarily infatuated though he might be, in time realise his error and come back to her?

It was a still night: the soft rain made no sound, and Ruth could hear steps coming up the lane before the walker was in sight of her cottage. On impulse, she switched off the light and returned to the window, standing back so that she was not visible. The footsteps approached rapidly, then slowed and went past. She knew, though in the darkness a dim bulk was all that she could distinguish, that it was Robert who went by. He could see the light on downstairs. He must have learned of her arrival from Marjorie, but he would assume it was coincidence; he need never discover that she had deliberately sought him out, and taken this step to enter his life again. She stood in the dark and waited as he passed; on he went, up the hill and out of earshot.

Ruth put her hand to her face: it was hot, and her legs felt weak. She closed the window and stumbled across the unfamiliar room to the door. Slowly, she walked downstairs and into the sitting-room. In spite of the electric fire which had been on for hours, the atmosphere was that of a room which has been empty too long in damp weather. She had abandoned her attempts to light a coal fire when the chimney started to smoke; this must wait till Birdupp could sweep it, as Marjorie had assured her he would.

It had been a strange afternoon. She was horrified to discover Marjorie's identity, but then curiosity took over: how had this unsophisticated woman won Robert? Beyond her name, Ruth had discovered nothing about her; she had speculated, imagining a schemer or more probably someone with an established position of her own whom Robert was enlisting to reinforce his ambition. Ruth

had no illusions about Robert after so long; she knew he would seek every aid to personal advancement.

She knew her own ability too, and was sure that together they would be invincible, but when she told him of this conviction, at once he had become evasive, almost hostile. No permanent commitment was part of his plan at this time; in his view, their relationship owed its success to the fact that either could end it at will. They parted in anger for the first time, and after this events followed one another very fast. Robert had a severe attack of 'flu, and went, on the spur of the moment, to Switzerland. Ruth was away in Scotland preparing a series; she did not communicate with Robert, nor he with her, but she was sure that when she returned to London all would be as before. Instead, she read the news of his engagement in the paper. She saw it by chance, since she seldom bothered to read the column where it appeared. At first she thought it was a hoax; only later was she filled with rage that such a thing could happen and that she should hear it in such a way. She stormed round her flat, picturing scenes in which she challenged him and he capitulated. Daily she expected him to telephone. At length pride took charge; she wrote a brief letter of congratulation, mockingly phrased. But no answer came.

Desperate now, she called at his flat, certain that if they met habit would reassert itself and their quarrel be forgotten, but he was never there. He never explained.

She determined to forget him, and for a time succeeded. Her trip to America helped, for the fresh environment and the pace of her work were absorbing. Then she attempted to make contact with her children and failed; all her misery rose again, and was turned into wrath against Robert. She made up her mind to find him when she got back to England. There had been so much between them once that she could not believe he would be unmoved by seeing her. Why else had he run away without a word?

So here she was, with her plan of action still to be decided but the stage set. She poured herself out another drink, lit a cigarette, and stared into the metallic glow of the fire. Had he told Marjorie about her? Probably not, certainly never by name, or that would have been clear today. What had he said when Marjorie described her day? Ruth chuckled. She would have liked to have seen his face. Well, now he would suffer as she had done for all these months.

However things worked out, that much was certain.

She wondered where he had gone this evening in such a hurry. He knew she was here, or why had his footsteps slowed outside her cottage? On foot, he could not have gone far. Perhaps he was good-works bound, to a village meeting of some sort; she could imagine him dispensing goodwill and bounty to the community because this would be appropriate to his circumstances. Ruth would have enjoyed playing her part in such a life; it would have amused her to have won a high place in the hierarchy of local ladies. As a girl, she had lived in a village; constantly she spent weekends in the country and she knew the methods by which lonely wives filled their days. This wretched girl whom Robert had married had yet to find a formula. Robert must have appeared like an answer to prayer in her spinster life, at an age when choice and opportunity had grown small. It was easy to see why she had been amenable.

The ash on her cigarette grew long as Ruth sat in the big armchair, gazing into space. She let her mind wander, and her thoughts developed into a fantasy where Robert, on his way home from whatever had brought him out tonight, called to see her because he could not keep away. The room was quiet; no sound would mask his returning steps. She waited. It was odd to think that he was so near; odd to have been so close and not call out; odd to watch that figure pass, so familiar, now remote. No man had ever meant so much to her, nor could again. It could not be explained, but it was so. She closed her eyes and tried to visualise his face: the thick, dark brows over the brown eyes; the straight, fleshy nose and firm chin; the mouth, that expressed so much. Surely he would come?

She heard his steps at last, after three hours. Cold, stiff, she was still seated in her chair, waiting, when he passed again, walking fast, without a pause.

5

At eleven o'clock according to custom, Miss Parkinson, with the morning's dictation complete and the day planned, laid upon Robert's desk a cup of coffee and one Osborne biscuit.

'Will that be all, Mr Bretherton?'

'What?' Robert stared vaguely at his secretary. What did she want, this posturing girl? He peered at her thin face, half-hidden by a mane of long, straight hair that hung to her shoulders and was cropped into a fringe above her eyes. She wore a weird wool dress of petunia pink, striped with black; the skirt was very short and revealed slightly bowed, skinny legs. She was new, and still in awe of him. She could not spell, but she protected him capably on the telephone.

'Your coffee, Mr Bretherton.' The girl indicated it, near his right hand.

'Thank you. No, there's nothing else, Miss Parkinson.' Robert made an effort. He had concentrated on his letters, and habit helped him detach his mind from everything else. Now the events of the previous evening returned into his conscious thought.

'Mr Forbes has an appointment at twelve,' the girl reminded him.

The works manager: what was his problem? Robert tried to remember, while Miss Parkinson lingered. Her employer did not seem to be quite his normal self; he was pale, with mysterious circles under his eyes. Curiosity and concern competed within Miss Parkinson. Maybe the old boy had been on a binge, or perhaps Mrs Bretherton was having an affair with another man. Miss Parkinson spent most of her spare time in the cinema and had exciting

theories about married life.

Unrest among the girls who fed cardboard into a particular group of cutting machines, Robert recalled, was the reason for Mr Forbes' forthcoming visit. Miss Parkinson still hovered.

'Yes, I remember. Mr Forbes. That's all right, thanks, he said, and nodded in dismissal.

He watched the girl walk to the door. Her tight dress hampered her stride; she wore fragile patent leather shoes with slender straps across the insteps. Robert thought she looked half-starved and as if she had suffered from rickets in infancy. She departed, and when she had gone he flung down his pencil and took off the spectacles which he wore for reading. He rubbed his eyes. The steam from his coffee rose in a spiral before him; he drank some. There was too much sugar in it, but it was stimulating. He nibbled absently at his biscuit. After some consideration he picked up the telephone and asked the girl at the switchboard for an outside line.

Marjorie was not at home. Mrs Birdupp told him that she had gone into Brook's Norton on the bus.

Robert rang off without leaving a message. No communication had passed between his wife and himself since last night's scene. She had seemed to be asleep when he got back, and this morning she was up before he woke. Breakfast was on the table, the coffee percolating, and Marjorie and Rory nowhere to be seen when he came downstairs.

He wondered if she would ring him back. He did not encourage her to telephone him at the office, because it was an interruption, though sometimes he called her. He did not know the times of the buses; anyway it was useless now to attempt contact before Forbes arrived, but this thing must be stopped before it got worse. Marjorie must be forced to put Ruth off, and their quarrel must be sorted out before he faced the encounter that was now inevitable. He finished his coffee. What a situation. Of all things to happen, imagine Ruth picking on the village where he lived; it was a fantastic coincidence. He tried to view it objectively. Ruth was a mature woman of considerable experience; they had much in common and much to give each other. He might have married her; more than once he had contemplated it. He knew that her youth had not been happy, and that the separation fr/>m her children was bitter, harder to bear than she ever confessed. But when she put into words the possibility

of a more permanent partnership with him, his instinct had been instant flight: no woman would shackle him.

Almost at once, he had met Marjorie.

Robert played with his pencil, drawing cubes on the blotting paper. Bretherton was not a common name; Ruth must have realised that Marjorie was his wife, yet it seemed that she had said nothing about knowing him.

Why not?

Surprise must be the reason. He had been stunned, goodness knows. She would have been as shocked as he was now. Surely after all this time they would be able to meet without being affected? The more he thought about it, the less he was convinced. Scribbling on the blotting paper, shading his cubes and joining them into masses, Robert remembered some of the hours he had shared with Ruth and their moments of joy. He had behaved badly in not seeing her before he married; he had evaded her because he was not certain of being unmoved. She had written a letter, and he had not replied because he could think of no appropriate answer. To have praised Marjorie would have been to insult both women; it was better left. He knew nothing of Ruth's fruitless visits to his flat.

It was clear that Marjorie had taken a liking to Ruth. What would she feel if she knew the truth? Already, unwittingly, Ruth had provoked their first serious quarrel. What further harm might be caused merely by her presence as a neighbour? Robert's mind went round and round, as it had done during most of the night. They could move from Willerby House, of course; or Ruth might go away; but this would be a desperate remedy if lesser efforts failed. Few men reached Robert's age without entanglements of some sort, yet past loves did not dog them throughout their lives. Ruth, for the sake of what had been between them, would not want to imperil his marriage: a solution would be found. First, Marjorie must be persuaded to postpone tonight's meeting so that he could spend the evening restoring harmony at home. Then, at leisure, he would seek out Ruth and ask her to keep the secret of their past friendship.

No thought of the risks of imperfect confidence between himself and Marjorie entered Robert's mind as he reached this conclusion. He felt relief in making a decision, and at once switched his mind towards Mr Forbes and the recalcitrant girls.

He got through to Marjorie on the telephone in the afternoon. Forbes occupied the remainder of the morning, and he had lunch with Bill Smythson, his managing director, and some other colleagues, so that it was half past two before he was free.

'Oh, Robert—it's you.'

'Darling,' Robert began, and then stuck. The words he had planned to say refused to be uttered. How could he talk to her through this soulless instrument, with Betsy on the switchboard probably eavesdropping unless she was busy?

'Are you all right?' he substituted.

'Of course.' She was equally restrained.

'Will you put your supper guest off, please?' he asked.

'Why?'

'Because I ask you to. I want to talk to you.'

'I can't, Robert. You'll be here before Ruth arrives. Anything you want to say can be said then. I must go now, I'm busy. Goodbye.'

'Marjorie…

But she had hung up. Before he could call her back through the exchange someone wanted him on another line, and he was enmeshed again in the web of business.

In the train, he pulled out his evening paper and pretended to read. Somehow, and quickly, he must make it up with Marjorie. In retrospect he was appalled at how quickly their quarrel had ballooned from nothing. At The Crown, he had soon learned Ruth's name, that of the removal firm she had employed, the nature of her work, and her estimated age—accurate to within a year—and the fact that she was 'a widow or something', without asking a single question. He did not stay long in the pub; when he left its warm and friendly atmosphere, he walked for miles, wondering how best to deal with this difficult situation. He loved Marjorie and could not bear the risk of injuring their marriage. Former lovers could become friends; this was fact. He told himself that it would happen now, easily and naturally, but he was unconvinced. He did not realise how long he had been out. When he got home the house was in darkness except for the porch light, left on to guide him. Marjorie lay motionless in their big bed, her back turned to him, the blankets round her ears, isolated if not in genuine sleep, then in intent. Her withdrawal was complete and he could not violate it.

‘Robert Bretherton, I do believe!’

A hearty voice from the other side of the compartment startled him, and he looked up from his paper. Opposite, a man was grinning cheerfully, waiting to be recognised.

It took Robert some seconds to manage identification.

‘Goodness, it must be ten years!’ Slowly a smile appeared, to the relief of Philip Newton, who had thought his former friend looking very glum.

‘You’re married at last, I hear. Congratulations,’ said Philip. ‘Where are you living? Near me, I assume, since you’re travelling on this line.’

‘In Haverbury. It’s a small village—do you know it?’

‘Indeed I do. I get out at Brook’s Norton station too. I still live at Pendleford, that’s about ten miles from you,’ said Philip. ‘Well, well! Funny we haven’t met before. How long have you been in this part of the world?’

‘Since June,’ said Robert.

It turned out that Robert normally caught an earlier train up, and a later one down, than Philip, so the reason was made clear.

‘Hardworking chap, aren’t you?’ Philip grinned.

The two men had been in the Army and at Oxford together. Their ways had parted after Philip married and they had finally lost touch.

‘You must come over as soon as Joan’s back,’ said Philip. ‘Her mother’s ill just now and she’s had to go and hold the fort. The kids are at school.’

Robert asked polite questions about Philip’s family and was told the names and ages of his children, dogs and ponies.

‘Are you going back on your own now?’

‘Yes,’ said Philip. ‘I quite enjoy having the place to myself, as long as it doesn’t last too long. It’s peaceful after the tumult of family life. We’ve got a marvellous woman who comes in every day and leaves things for me to cook. I’m a dab hand at steaks and omelettes.’

‘Are you going back to an omelette tonight?’ asked Robert. A sudden idea had come to him.

‘Yes. Or I might try a Welsh rarebit,’ Philip said.

Robert was remembering him better with every moment; his geniality had always been his chief characteristic, and it seemed to have increased with the years.

'Why not come back with me? Just for pot luck?'

If Philip was there as a buffer, no possible trouble could arise. Four was a better number than three in any circumstances, and Philip would help to keep the conversational ball rolling.

'I'd love to, but will your wife mind? She may only have got two chops?' said Philip.

'Someone else is coming, a new neighbour Marjorie's befriended,' said Robert. 'I'm sure there will be enough.' He had an impulse to explain Ruth to Philip, but he resisted it. 'It's some lone woman who works for television or something,' he said. 'I'm sure you'd help us with a stranger.'

'Haven't you met her, then?'

Robert paused.

'No,' he said heavily. 'My wife found her yesterday. I haven't met her yet.'

6

‘This way. I’m sorry to bring you in through the kitchen but it’s easier, we always do this.’

Robert had put his own car in the garage. Philip, who had followed in his from the station, had parked on the gravel beside the house. It was raining, and very cold. The two men hurried indoors. Marjorie, changing upstairs, could hear sounds of heavy steps, laughter, conversation, and one sharp bark from Rory. Her mood throughout the day had changed from anger to misery, and then back again to rage. Robert had been completely unreasonable; she would not be browbeaten and he must learn this. In the moments when she felt wretched, it was a temptation to surrender, run up the village and fob off Ruth with an excuse, but she would not entertain this thought and each time it returned she fanned her wrath once more. It would be folly to yield; a friendship between herself and Ruth could be rewarding for both; it would take time to develop; indeed, it might not evolve, but it must be given the opportunity. Robert should not interfere. Jealousy was a destructive emotion, and in this case ridiculous. So she reasoned as the day wore on, but when she heard the car her impulse was to tear downstairs, half-dressed as she was, and fling herself into her husband’s arms.

Now, though, she was disconcerted. She had been hoping that Robert was as miserable as she was at their quarrel, but she could hear him laughing with whoever was his companion. The stranger was easily identified as male by his voice. She heard them walk across the hall; the cloakroom door opened and closed and Robert started to walk upstairs. When he came into their bedroom she was

sitting in front of her dressing-table putting on lipstick.

'Marjorie, darling.' Robert sincerely intended to repair the rift between them and had decided upon humility as the means of achieving this aim. The sight of Marjorie, dressed only in her white slip, with her shoulders bare and her hair gleaming against her pale skin, drove his prepared speech from his mind; he strode across to her, arms stretched out.

She moved away as his hands touched her flesh, and turned her mouth from him.

'I've just done my face. You'll mess my lipstick,' she said.

Robert's instinct was to answer, 'To hell with your lipstick,' but he remembered his plan for abasement. He dropped his arms and stepped back.

'I met an old friend on the train, Philip Newton. He lives at Pendleford, that's about ten miles from here. His wife's away, so I brought him back for dinner. Will it stretch?'

Marjorie finished brushing her eyelashes with mascara before answering.

'There's plenty,' she said at last. 'It's chicken.' Goodbye to tomorrow's economy fricassee.

'That's good. I hope you don't mind.'

Marjorie showed no surprise at this meekness.

'Of course not,' she said. She got up from the dressingtable, took her peacock-blue wool dress from the bed and stepped into it. As she pulled it up, sliding her arms into the sleeves and shrugging it over her shoulders, Robert came behind her and began to fasten the zip; he stopped when it reached the middle of her back and kissed her on her neck. His lips lingered, moving down her spine. She remained still.

'There. That can't mess up your makeup,' he said, with some satisfaction, when he released her and drew up the zip until it was closed.

'Why do you apologise for producing an old friend on the spur of the moment? You wouldn't if it was a business acquaintance,' Marjorie said, seeming not to notice the kiss. In fact, her heart was thudding uncomfortably; she longed to respond, and willed Robert to assert himself now, although with their guest waiting below and

dinner to dish up, there was no time for more than a gesture.

Robert muttered something inaudible. Her remark was justified and he could think of no excuse.

'I must have a wash. I'll be down in a few minutes,' he said, without answering her question, and went off to the bathroom.

Marjorie made sure that her hair was undisturbed by his embrace; she dabbed scent hastily behind her ears and went downstairs. A week ago she would have waited diffidently until Robert was ready and could introduce her to his friend, but tonight was different. Belligerence made her confident. She crossed the hall and entered the sitting-room. Philip was standing in front of the fire. He had not heard her, and the immediate impression she had of him was of a short, dark man, clearly tired, stooping as he leaned against the mantelpiece and looked at the flames. He turned and straightened at her approach. His face was rather red, though whether from the fire's warmth or from natural ruddiness Marjorie could not tell. He smiled at her; blue eyes, very shrewd, and with humour in their appraisal, looked at her curiously.

'Hullo. I'm Marjorie,' she said, and held out her hand. Philip took it. His palm was dry and his clasp firm. They gazed at each other for the instant's inspection which, if prolonged beyond that time, would become blatantly a stare, and both approved of what they saw.

'I hope you aren't going to shoot Robert for bringing me back like this, unheralded,' Philip said.

'Not at all, I'm so glad you came,' she said warmly. 'You must be longing for a drink. What would you like? Whisky?'

'Please.'

He deflected as he watched her mix it that the conventions were a great aid to social procedure; greetings and the problems of what to say to strangers were channelled into offerings of refreshment and cigarettes. By the time these matters were dealt with some sort of adjustment had been made and acquaintance begun. Marjorie seemed self-possessed and as poised as if she had been married for years, yet he had the impression that she was not a sophisticated woman. Of course, these days girls lived in flats with other girls from practically the schoolroom, and learned to be hostesses while they grew up. In any case, it was hardly likely that the ambitious

Robert would select an incompetent, gauche girl as a wife; even so, Philip was sure that under her composure she was shy.

'Water or soda?'

'Water, please.'

She gave him his glass, and poured out another whisky for herself.

'Do sit down,' she said, folding herself neatly into a corner of the large sofa which faced the hearth. Her movements were economical; physically she was well-coordinated. Philip sat down at the other end of the sofa and raised his glass.

'Cheers,' he said, unimaginatively.

She smiled and responded.

'Ah, that's good.' Philip stretched his short legs out and relaxed. If he had been a business associate of Robert's, Marjorie would now have been anxiously casting about in her mind for something intelligent to say, whilst at the same time fretting in case the bread sauce was turning into porridge in the oven. Now, she did not worry, but merely swirled the liquid in her glass, looking at the firelight through its amber lens, as she recognised the thought and chuckled at it. It did not occur to her that there was some connection between Philip's disposition as an individual and her reaction.

'Something's amusing you,' he observed. 'Won't you share the joke?'

Why not? In her new mood, she could think of no objection.

'I was just thinking that if Robert had brought back one of his business chums like this I'd have been falling over myself with agitation,' she said. 'I always do.'

'Does he do that often?'

'No, not as much now as when we lived in London. But we entertain for business more than for ordinary friends. This is nicer, and it's much better to be four than three. Did Robert tell you about Ruth?'

'Not really, just that someone else was coming. You tell me,' he suggested.

She began to do so, and when Robert came into the room a few minutes later they were talking away like old friends. Marjorie had

learned that Philip was a solicitor and the father of four daughters, responsible in their absence at school for the well-being of three ponies and five rabbits who needed hay and green stuff's variously each day, and constant reassurance as to their mistresses' devotion. It appeared that the twins were temporarily boarding at their school while their mother was away; the older girls were at a more senior school which one of them was due to leave at Christmas.

'Marjorie has looked after you, I hope. Have you got a drink? Ah, good.'

Robert was surprised by the atmosphere of happy relaxation in the room, but it altered subtly with his entry. Philip noticed Marjorie stiffen slightly; she set her glass down clumsily and spilled a little of her drink, mopping it up in surreptitious haste with her handkerchief. Robert poured a stiff tot out for himself, splashed soda into it and carried it across to the fireplace.

'Was the train very crowded tonight?' Marjorie's voice had lost some of its animation as she dropped the trite little question into the sudden pool of silence.

'No more than usual. It's odd that Philip and I should travel this way every day and never have run into one another before.' As he spoke, Robert sat down in one of the large armchairs which were placed on either side of the fireplace.

'You work too hard, old boy,' said Philip. 'I can't think why. If I were you I'd seek every excuse to leave betimes.' His look at Marjorie made his meaning apparent. She laughed, her colour rose, and she stood up.

'What a nice guest,' she said. 'You must excuse me. Ruth will be here soon and I have to nip out to the kitchen. Where's Rory, Robert?'

'I shut him in the kitchen. He got rather muddy giving us his usual enthusiastic welcome,' said Robert.

'I expect he wants his dinner,' Marjorie said. She went quickly from the room, and when the door had closed Philip said, 'Congratulations.'

'What for? Oh, Marjorie. Yes, thanks,' said Robert. 'Mind you, we've been married over a year now, we aren't newlyweds any more.'

'Where did you meet?'

Robert told him. He did not notice Philip's quizzical expression as he listened to the odd, untypical story. Whilst he spoke, Robert was remembering that very soon Ruth would be in this room, and though he would be unmoved at seeing her even so he had something to conceal, and he had not yet had an opportunity to seek her cooperation.

Marjorie was out of the room for only a few minutes. She had prepared everything well in advance, for with Robert expressing such inhospitable sentiments towards their visitor, she was determined to be more welcoming than ever. When the front door bell rang she was off in a moment to admit Ruth.

'Don't move, Philip. They'll be hours,' said Robert, as Philip began collecting himself together ready to stand up. 'Marjorie will take her upstairs to prink.'

Sure enough, the women's voices could be heard exclaiming over the horrors of the winter weather in diminuendo tones as they ascended.

'Marjorie told me about your neighbour. Poor woman,' said Philip.

'Yes.' Here was Robert's chance at least to confess his lie to his friend, but he let it go.

'Sounds as if she's got a very interesting job. I'm looking forward to meeting her. It's probably better than beastly marriage, if that's what she had. She'll be a fellow-user of Brook's Norton station, no doubt.'

Robert had not thought of this. He was still absorbing the idea when the women could be heard coming downstairs. Slowly, he and Philip rose to their feet as the door opened.

'Ruth, this is Robert, my husband.' Marjorie ushered her guest into the room. 'And you haven't met Mr Newton. Mrs Castle.' She performed the introductions smoothly.

There was still time. Both could have exclaimed in amazed recognition, and Robert waited for a cue from Ruth, but as they faced each other neither revealed any emotion. Ruth saw the man whose image had haunted her for years, quite familiar, yet curiously altered by his remote aspect. Robert saw a woman whom once he had desired greeting him as a known stranger; there had been others, and he did not fear them, yet Ruth he feared and he

did not know the reason.

‘Do come over by the fire, you must be cold. Is it still raining? Did you walk down? What would you like to drink?’ In a flood of activity and questions Robert broke down any reserve in his greeting.

Ruth asked for a gin and vermouth, and while Robert mixed it she allowed herself to be propelled towards and finally into the second armchair by the fire.

‘Robert and Philip are old friends, Ruth. They met on the train tonight after not seeing each other for years,’ said Marjorie.

‘Do you live near here too, Mr Newton?’ asked Ruth politely.

Marjorie made a little face to herself. She had automatically used Philip’s Christian name, since he was Robert’s friend; technically perhaps this was wrong.

These niceties always worried her. Philip caught her eye, and before answering Ruth, he spoke to her.

‘Marjorie, you were sitting here.’ He patted the sofa. ‘Come and finish your drink, and make old Robert give you another.’ Then he turned to Ruth and said, ‘Yes, I live at Pendleford. Do you know it?’

Ruth did not. They played the conversational game of that - must - be - a - pleasant - spot, let - me - tell - you - about mine, for a few minutes while Robert gave Ruth her glass and supplied another round of drinks for everyone else. Then he offered cigarettes, and managed to light Ruth’s with a steady hand. Purposefully, she avoided his eyes as he did so.

They all talked generally about houses, the horrors of moving and the illness of Philip’s mother-in-law. Ruth sat back in her chair. She wore a clinging black silk jersey dress; her face was pale; and her dark hair, brushed sleekly past her ears, exposed pearl earrings, apart from which she wore no jewellery. Her dress was one that Robert remembered; he remembered, too, buying the earrings for her birthday three years before. Covertly he watched her while the conversation continued. His first unease was dispersing; for some reason she seemed no more anxious to acknowledge him than he was to recognise her. At least tonight should be manageable, whatever might lie ahead.

‘This is a charming room. What attractive curtains,’ said Ruth, when there was no more to say about Pendleford and Haverbury.

She flicked her cigarette ash into a small Venetian glass ashtray on a table beside her. She had bought that bowl for Robert in a shop off St Mark's Square after they had been to watch glass being blown in a furnace nearby. Its twin was in her own bedroom.

'Do you like them? I think they're lovely. Robert had them in his flat,' said Marjorie.

'Where was your flat?' Ruth asked Robert, gazing at him.

His mouth was dry and he moved uneasily in his seat.

'Chelsea,' he muttered, unable to meet her eye. This was ridiculous, yet with every sentence it became more impossible to undo the deception.

'How nice. I have several friends in Chelsea,' said Ruth. There followed an enlargement upon the merits of the area and the surprise discovery of mutual friends.

'These two haven't been married long, you know,' Philip told Ruth. 'I always thought Robert was a confirmed bachelor. Much too careful. No wonder you were done for when you met Marjorie, though, eh, Robert?'

Robert gave a sickly smile. Marjorie thought that he considered this no subject for jest; but Philip's attitude towards her had a champagne effect, and she felt supremely confident. The evening would be a success. She was quite oblivious of the electrical atmosphere between her husband and Ruth. Robert was at least being civil to Ruth, though rather silent.

'It was lucky for me that he did stay a bachelor so long,' she said, smiling at Robert.

She was sure that Philip, by entering their lives, would transform them with his renewed friendship, though it was too much to hope that his wife would be as pleasant and easy as he was. She wanted to forgive Robert for his transgressions and now regretted her lack of response earlier in the evening; by subtle means she must make clear to him during the next hours that she had relented.

'Oh, well, he broke a few hearts in his day,' said Philip, grinning. 'Don't worry, Robert, I won't give you away.'

'I should hope he did,' said Marjorie bluntly. 'It would have been peculiar, to say the least, if he'd lived quite uneventfully for forty years.'

Robert at last made an attempt to address Ruth.

'We were in the Army together,' he told her. 'In our wild youth. This must all be very boring to you.' He could not call her by name; if they had in fact just met for the first time he would balk at using her Christian name, but he could not possibly speak formally to her as Mrs Castle.

'On the contrary, I find it fascinating,' said Ruth. She crossed one long, elegant leg over the other. 'Do go on.'

'There's no more to tell,' Robert said. 'Marjorie must have told you how we found this house last spring.' He poured the rest of his drink down and got up. 'Let me get you a drink. Gin and french, wasn't it?'

'Thank you.' Ruth gave him her glass. 'I'd love one just like the first. You mixed it as if you knew exactly how I like a martini.'

Robert coughed.

'Most people like them pretty dry, don't you think?' he said. 'Just a touch of vermouth.' He clattered away with the bottles and ice. Ruth was going to make him pay for her silence, that much was clear. He could only hope that time would harden his sensibilities and exhaust her ammunition.

7

Obsessed by the thought of Robert and Marjorie together, Ruth spent a sleepless night. During dinner she had watched Robert gradually discard his reticent manner; he became an attentive and unobtrusive host, supporting Marjorie without apparent effort in the serving of the meal, and leading the conversation in directions likely to interest both his guests. As the evening progressed his attitude to his wife increasingly displayed deep affection; it was revealed in many small ways besides the more obvious ones of speech and gesture. Ruth, lighting one cigarette from the stub of the last, heard again the inflection in his voice when he used Marjorie's name; he made it sound as close to a caress as an endearment. It must be just an infatuation, Ruth tried to convince herself. In time it would wear off: the two were so different. Robert was hardheaded, materialistic and ambitious; she assessed Marjorie as none of these things, but as gentle and even a little timid. She had expected to hate the woman who had taken Robert from her, yet in spite of what had happened she could not help liking her. Beneath Marjorie's unassuming manner lurked a streak of humour; she was practical and goodhearted. If they had met in different circumstances they could have been friends.

Ruth got out of bed, put on her dressing-gown and went downstairs. It was cold in the living-room. She switched on the electric fire before sitting down with still another cigarette. Superficially the evening had been very pleasant; the food and drink were good, the chicken moist and tender, the coffee mousse light and creamy. The talk was easy and there were no awkward pauses; Ruth was encouraged to give her impressions of America,

and Philip told scurrilous tales about human nature as he had discovered it to be in his dealings with it. But all the time Ruth had been so acutely aware of Robert that most of her conscious thought was taken up with him and the situation in which they were. Philip took her home on his way back to Pendleford, and she had suffered the anguish of looking from the car window to see Robert with his arm round Marjorie framed in the lighted doorway of their home.

What could she do?

When morning came she was still in a state of misery and indecision. At half-past seven she watched Robert drive past on the way to the station; she saw him return again in the evening. She knew now how his timetable worked, if that should be any help.

At the weekend, Marjorie telephoned to invite her over for lunch on Sunday. Robert's chairman and his wife were staying, she explained; and Philip, who was still alone, was coming over too. Ruth had proved so good a conversationalist that Marjorie was anxious to have her aid, but Robert was reluctant to ask her until he knew that Philip would also be free. He murmured something about surplus women and uneven numbers.

'It doesn't matter about numbers. Anyway, Ruth's no liability, she's attractive and has plenty to say,' Marjorie insisted. She had been certain that when they met Robert would like Ruth and cease his objections. 'I can't think why she's never married again,' she continued.

Robert did not answer. He could not go on making an issue of this; there was no reason to object to Ruth coming down to the house, and what Marjorie said about her was true. He had to learn to live with this situation and the sooner he grew used to seeing Ruth the better. Meanwhile, all was well again between Marjorie and himself, in fact their quarrel and subsequent reconciliation seemed to have drawn them closer to one another; both had been frightened by the ease with which discord had been struck between them. Robert had always felt an urge to protect Marjorie, and now this feeling grew deeper; he dreaded the possibility that she might be hurt, and by him. This was something he had not felt for Ruth, who had never seemed vulnerable; indeed it was her independent self-sufficiency that had attracted him. It did not occur to him that the circumstances of her life had compelled her to adopt such a manner, and that it might not be wholly sincere.

Sunday was a success. Marjorie, sure of Ruth's aid if it were needed, worried less than usual in advance, and so was collected and calm when her visitors arrived. Sir Frederick proved to be more genial than she had realised from their previous encounters; his wife was appreciative, and less alarming in tweeds than in purple brocade. Robert, listening to Ruth discussing teenage *mores* with Sir Frederick, blessed his own prudence in never taking Ruth with him to any business function. An innate sense of self-preservation had prevented him from doing such a thing, the same instinct that made him obey the old injunction to 'do right and fear no man, don't write and fear no woman.' But he was afraid now: Ruth had the power to cause disaster. He determined to avoid being alone with her, but he did not succeed for long. On Monday evening she waylaid him in the lane on his way back from the station. She stood in front of his car, forcing him to stop.

'I must talk to you, Robert. Come into the cottage,' she said.

He tried to keep calm, remembering that they were all just jolly good friends together.

'I can't, Ruth. Marjorie is expecting me. If you want to talk, come on down and have a drink with us.' This seemed to him a crafty inspiration; attack was the best defence.

'I must see you alone,' Ruth insisted.

He could drive off and leave her standing there, but that might jeopardise future encounters. He dare not risk a scene in the middle of the village; they might well be under observation already from a dozen windows. It would be quicker in the end to do as she asked. He moved the car in to the side of the road, pulled on the handbrake, switched off the engine, and got out. Ruth led the way up the path, and he followed her inside the cottage. When she closed the door behind him he thought ridiculously for an instant that she was his gaoler.

'I mustn't stay more than a minute or two,' he said remaining near the door. He saw now that Ruth looked very tired. Her face, always pale, was white, and her eyes seemed immense.

'Marjorie won't worry. Ring her up if you like,' she said carelessly. 'I suppose you haven't trained her yet not to keep tabs on you.'

This was a sharp thrust. During their long association Robert had

never divulged his plans or explained his actions to Ruth.

'What do you want to say to me?' he asked.

'I want your thanks for keeping quiet,' Ruth told him. 'For some reason you haven't told that unfortunate woman about me.'

'How could I tell her? What did you expect me to do? It was all such a shock,' Robert said.

'Was it?' Ruth decided that this was not the moment to disclose that she was not surprised.

'Did she think she'd married a good little boy, then?' she asked, walking away from him and taking a cigarette out of the box on the table.

Robert watched her. She was dressed in black slacks and a loose, dark sweater. She had always been thin and elegant; now she was visibly tense, and for the first time in this new context, Robert felt a pang for her; he was not sure quite why; perhaps he pitied her?

'Don't be ridiculous. But people don't expect to hear chapter and verse when it's all over,' he said impatiently.

'It would be very difficult to tell her now, wouldn't it?' Ruth observed. 'Almost impossible, in fact. She'd find her confidence in you sadly shaken, wouldn't she? Why didn't you tell her, I wonder?'

Robert wished he knew. Because he was a coward, perhaps, and did not trust his ability to convince Marjorie there was nothing to fear from a past now suddenly confronting them.

'We haven't had time,' he said.

'For what? For confessions?'

'To establish ourselves together,' he said, thinking aloud.

'I haven't said I won't give you away,' Ruth reminded him.

'Ruth, why are you so bitter? What would you gain? You've said nothing so far, why do it now?'

How could he be so obtuse? And yet she would not give him the satisfaction of knowing what power he had once had over her, so much that now she sought revenge for her hurt.

'Please don't tell Marjorie,' he pleaded. 'For the sake of the past good times we've had, please don't.'

'Robert, you disappoint me. I didn't think you could be so corny,' she said. 'What's it worth to keep quiet?'

He could not believe his ears.

'Are you threatening to blackmail me?' he asked incredulously. 'You're joking, of course.'

'I'm not after money,' she said, consideringly.

Now he was really afraid.

'Ruth, if you hurt Marjorie, I'll—I'll…

'Yes, Robert? What will you do? Do tell me?'

He was going to say, 'I'll kill you,' but the words were melodramatic and he disliked drama in real life. He took a deep breath and said more calmly, 'Look, Ruth, I love Marjorie. We're happy. She needs me, and we can make a good marriage if we have the chance. I won't let you imperil us. In fact, I'm sure you can't want to do so. You must be still suffering from the shock of finding us here. Won't you go away? Couldn't you move somewhere else?'

'Why should I? This cottage suits me perfectly. If anyone is going to move, it will have to be you,' Ruth said.

'That's impossible. Marjorie would never agree and I couldn't give her an adequate reason,' he said. 'Well, then, since you and she seem to have made friends, can't we all just coexist? After all, lots of people have affairs and part, even marry and part, and stay friends.'

'Friends!' Ruth wondered if she and Robert had ever been friends. 'You didn't answer my letter,' she said.

'I didn't know how,' he replied truthfully.

At last a little of Ruth's defence cracked.

'It was so cruel. Couldn't you have told me you were going to marry?' she said, and he saw pain on her face. He began to comprehend just what he had done, but he would not accept the responsibility. You couldn't be expected to marry a woman just because she would be bitterly hurt if you did not.

'I didn't think you would mind. We never made claims on each other,' he said. 'That was why we had such a successful relationship. We were both free. You could have married.'

'How like a man,' Ruth exclaimed. 'You egotist.'

'Ruth, please try to put it all behind you, as I have,' he urged. 'Let's just be friends. Please try.'

'Do you think we can do it?'

‘Yes, I’m sure we can.’

She shrugged.

‘We can try, I suppose.’ She came towards him and stood very close, her cigarette in her hand. To her, it seemed incredible that he could face her in this way and make no move to touch her. She could compel him, if she threatened him. She played with this thought briefly, but banished it at the realisation that she did not want unwilling surrender. She must defeat Marjorie by other, subtler means, or Robert would hate her. She turned away.

‘Go back to your little bride and don’t worry, Robert,’ she said. ‘I’ll keep your secret for you.’

Then he moved. In relief, he strode across to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

‘Bless you, Ruth. I’m sure it will work out,’ he said thankfully. ‘And tell us if we can help in any way—with the cottage, or whatever else crops up.’ He could be generous now.

‘Oh, Robert—you mean I can call on you if I need you,’ she said mockingly. ‘I thought you could do better than that.’

Her body was on fire as he held her, but he made no attempt at closer contact. He was eager to escape, and barely registered her words.

‘Well, pop down some time,’ he said. ‘Now I must go.’

And he left her standing there. She heard the car start and move off down the road. Ten minutes later she was still standing in the middle of the room, her arms crossed over her breast and her hands touching her shoulders where his had rested.

8

The days grew shorter. Bleak November came to an end, and December began. Thoroughly indoctrinated by advertisements and articles in the press, Marjorie prepared for Christmas. Robert's parents and his younger brother Clive were coming to stay for the holiday, and she was determined to make their visit a success. Her own parents were dead; her father had been killed during the war, and her mother had died three years before she and Robert met. She did not yet know the elder Brethertons well, for Robert saw very little of them; they lived in a large old house in Norfolk, where she and Robert had spent last Christmas. Her chief memory of those days was of extreme cold; the house, once a rectory, was full of draughts and long passages; there was no central heating, and few modern aids to domesticity. Much of the time had been spent washing-up, lighting fires, chopping wood and carrying coal. Reluctant to be quite so uncomfortable again, Robert and Marjorie had suggested that this year the old people should have a rest from all their chores and come to Willerby House. There had been considerable speculation about whether they dare risk leaving their home unattended during what might be freezing weather, but in the end the jobbing gardener they employed was bribed to keep the boiler going, and they accepted.

Marjorie liked her parents-in-law, and would have been happy to see more of them; her own mother's death had left a gap in her life which they might partly fill; but Robert showed no desire,to journey up to Norfolk more than two or three times a year. Clive, who was a bachelor, spent frequent weekends with his parents and kept an eye on their welfare. Mr Bretherton had been a civil servant

of some stature; he was now nearly eighty. Marrying late in life seemed a habit with the family, Marjorie mused, as she made up the bed for her brother-in-law in Robert's dressing-room. Mrs Bretherton was younger, still in her sixties, a slim, active woman who enjoyed walking and could set a brisk pace as she strode out, accompanied by her small, highly-strung white terrier, Flash, who would also be coming to stay and must somehow tolerate and be tolerated by Rory. She was a knowledgeable gardener and a keen botanist, able to identify almost any plant that was shown to her, wild or otherwise. During their few meetings she and Marjorie had found plenty to discuss; they had much in common apart from Robert and would have been drawn to one another under any circumstances.

Like his father, Clive served the nation; he was well up on the ladder to success, ornamenting a responsible post in one of the Ministries and likely to ascend in time to one of the loftiest rungs. He had spent several weekends at Willerby House during the summer, press-ganged into heavy labour with paint brush, garden shears and spade. Marjorie knew him well now. He was not very like Robert, except in his ambition to reach the heights of his profession; physically he was smaller, and moved quickly like his mother. Marjorie imagined the Civil Service to be shackled throughout by red tape, and wondered how someone who seemed to think and speak so fast could endure its frustrations patiently. Clive had a slight nervous tic which made the side of his mouth twitch sometimes, as if he were suppressing a smile; perhaps this was a manifestation of inner conflict.

A week before Christmas, amid apparent rejoicing by the parents on both sides, Clive became engaged to a girl whom he had known for a year or two. This event was a surprise, for his family had given up expecting any of his friendships to develop so far. So Sarah was coming too, and would sleep in the room which would one day be the nursery. It would be fun having the house full: Marjorie enjoyed being so busy. She had never made Christmas puddings before; with Mrs Birdupp's encouragement a rich mixture was concocted and vigorously stirred before being steamed for hours. Dark, moist, and full of promise, the bowls stood on the larder shelf gently maturing.

The weekend before Christmas, Marjorie and Robert went over to Pendleford to see the Newtons, and came back with the boot of the

car laden with holly and mistletoe cut from their spinney. Joan Newton, when she returned after her mother's recovery, proved to be a cheerful person, vague and generous. Through her and Philip the Brethertons soon met other couples; as a result they began to be invited round the district. The weeks before Christmas were gay ones; there were a lot of parties and dinners. Where they went, Ruth was invited too; she had other contacts from her work, and was out more often than the Brethertons.

Ruth was going home to her parents for Christmas. Marjorie tried to ignore the relief this knowledge gave her, for it was ungenerous; but there was no denying that she was glad because there need be no outsider invited into the Bretherton family gathering. When she confessed this unguardedly to Robert, he agreed with a warmth that surprised her, for by now he seemed to accept Ruth totally. They often travelled back from London on the same train, although he left so early each morning that they rarely went up together. Once, Ruth's car was in dock, and she asked for a lift, catching the earlier train, but this had not been repeated. She came to a meal at least once a week, and on the days when she did not go up to London, Marjorie usually saw her. She was part of their lives and the neighbour they knew best.

Robert went to the office as usual on Christmas Eve, but by car, as he sometimes did. He hoped to get away at lunchtime; his parents were coming to London by train to meet him, and be driven down to Willerby House during the afternoon. Both of them still drove their elderly and sedate Rover, but such a long trip at this treacherous time of the year was not to be undertaken. Clive and Sarah would arrive later on, probably just in time for dinner.

Marjorie was pleased with her arrangements. There was a Christmas tree in the hall, dressed with fairy lights and fragile glass baubles. She had tucked holly behind the pictures, and arranged a tall vase of it in the drawingroom. A pile of gaily-wrapped parcels was stacked on the floor of her bedroom cupboard, among her shoes. She was excited; this Christmas would mark the start of the traditions which Robert and she would make their own during the years to come. Before long, she still hoped, there would be children upstairs and stockings to fill. Meanwhile, the smaller customs would begin to grow.

Everything that could possibly be prepared in advance was done;

the weekend was to be a triumph of domestic organisation. The larder was full of cold puddings, mince pies and peeled potatoes. The turkey was stuffed and wrapped in foil ready for the oven; a ham was cooking gently, destined to be eaten hot for dinner this evening and thereafter become a standby as required. The brandy butter was made; there was a huge section of Stilton waiting for the appreciation of connoisseurs.

Robert's parents would spend a few days in far greater warmth and comfort than they were accustomed to at home; perhaps they would return with the urge to install an oil-fired central-heating system into their house, which Robert said they could certainly afford and ought to have at their age. At least they would have a rest, which would do them good. At home, their stoking activities kept them on the go nearly all day in the winter.

But what Marjorie was really looking forward to was having Robert at home for four whole days. He was tired, she knew; he had been working very hard, even harder than usual, and often seemed worried, though he denied having more than the ordinary anxieties of business on his mind. Because all the visitors were his own family, for Sarah would soon become a member, he would be under no strain as a host. Clive, always a hardworking guest, would no doubt be falling over himself with helpfulness in order that his future bride might witness him to advantage. The days would truly be filled with peace and goodwill.

In the morning, Marjorie walked up to Rose Cottage to see Ruth before she left for Godalming. It was a mild, damp day, overcast, with the threat of rain to come. Rory was left at home; his large feet would bring wet and mud into Ruth's room, spoiling the polish on her floor.

Cigarette in mouth, Ruth was putting a suitcase into the car which was drawn up on the green outside the cottage.

'Ah, I've caught you. Are you just off?' Marjorie cried.

'Not for half an hour. Come and have some coffee,' said Ruth. She shut the boot of the car and led the way into the cottage. 'All set for the big weekend?'

Marjorie closed the door behind them.

'Yes, everything's ready. I'm looking forward to it. I hope everything will be all right.'

‘I’m sure it will.’ Ruth knew that Marjorie had taken immense pains and left little to chance, for every plan had been disclosed to her as it was made.

‘Oh, Ruth, you have made this room pretty. It’s lovely.’ Marjorie had said this before, but each time she came to the cottage it struck her afresh. ‘What a lot of cards!’

Ruth had pinned the dozens of cards she had received on tape and strung them from the beams of her sittingroom. They hung, a splash of colour, against the white walls, now painted by Bill Birdupp. On the table there was a copper bowl holding an elaborate arrangement of holly and other evergreens; some of the leaves were lightly tipped with white and frosted over, and three poinsettias made a focal centre with their crimson blaze.

‘Oh, isn’t that gorgeous! Did you do it?’

Ruth laughed.

‘Yes, it’s rather flung together in a hurry, I’m afraid,’ she said. ‘I had some people in last night so I had to make an effort.’

‘It doesn’t look like a rush job. How clever you are!’ All at once the vase of holly which Marjorie had assembled with such care seemed thoroughly amateurish; she had been so pleased with it, the leaves dark and shining, and the berries well displayed, a work of nature, not of art.

‘I’m glad you like it.’

Ruth went into the kitchen and filled a pan with milk. Slowly Marjorie followed. The kitchen was as neat and spotless as the living-room, as though Mrs Birdupp had just left, which could not be the case since even now she was cleaning the silver at Willerby House. Ruth seemed able to do everything she undertook superlatively well, and her appearance was always immaculate, whether she was dressed in slacks and a sweater, a formal dress, or as now, in a thick tweed suit of a shade of purple which Marjorie would never have attempted to wear.

‘How long will it take you to get home?’

‘About two hours. I’m having lunch with friends on the way,’ said Ruth. ‘One of my producers lives near Reading, in a gorgeous house with a garden running right down to the river. Heaven in summer.’

‘You know such exciting people,’ sighed Marjorie. Of course, she did not exactly envy Ruth; all the same, her life seemed full of

glamour.

Ruth laughed.

‘They’re not very thrilling. Just like everyone else, really, quite dull.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

Marjorie accepted her cup of foaming instant coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. Ruth lit a new cigarette and took another chair facing her.

‘What will you do at home?’

‘Oh, go to church, have the vicar to Christmas lunch, and a few friends in for sherry. Eat too much, I expect,’ said Ruth. ‘It will be a rest, anyway.’

She must be thinking of her children, so far away in Canada. They ought all to be together. This gathering of fancies must emphasise to Ruth her bitter loss.

‘As a matter of fact, I think all this Christmas togetherness is greatly overdone,’ Ruth cut in on Marjorie’s reflections. ‘People who have nothing in common except the accident of being related get together and expect to enjoy each other’s company. They haven’t chosen each other. No wonder there are so many squabbles and family feuds.’

‘Oh, Ruth, do you think so? Surely it must be awful to have no relations and nowhere to go?’

‘I think it would be bliss to retreat to a country hotel in the wilds of Dartmoor and see only ponies and snow,’ said Ruth. ‘But even there one would be forced into seasonal jollification, I expect.’

‘Don’t you want to go home and see your parents?’ Marjorie demanded, shocked.

‘Not much. But I’ve no real excuse for staying away, and it would hurt them if I did. Besides, I hardly ever do go and see them, so I’m getting it over,’ Ruth said.

‘But Ruth—Marjorie began to protest, and then stopped. Things had gone very wrong for Ruth long ago; she had stepped from the conventional track when she was young, and had shed sentimentality early. Indeed, it was her astringent comment that made her such a stimulating companion. This was how she coped; best to let it go, Marjorie decided.

All the same, Ruth must be fundamentally a very lonely woman, so that it was sad for her to possess parents whom she sought out only with reluctance. To some extent, Robert resembled Ruth in this attitude, but he conformed to the more usual expected codes of conduct and cared a great deal about the impression he gave to outsiders, whereas Ruth seemed unheeding of the opinion of others. Robert was fond of his father in an impatient way, and devoted to his mother, although this was something he hid. Mockingly, he said they treated him as if he were still a schoolboy, and he would not offer them many opportunities for this indulgence.

Ruth said now, in a resigned voice, 'I expect the parents will come up during the summer. They're clamouring to see the cottage. They think I was mad to buy it and bury myself here.' Sometimes I think so as well, she added to herself. 'If they do descend on me, I'll have to rope you in to help me entertain them, Marjorie. They'll like you.'

They would, too. She was just the sort of daughter they would have chosen, if they could.

'Now I must throw you out,' she went on. 'Sorry.'

'I've got to go anyway. I only came to wish you a happy Christmas and bring you this.' Marjorie now drew from her pocket a small parcel. 'You're not to undo it till tomorrow. Promise you won't. It's with love from us both.'

'Oh, Marjorie, what a child you are! No peeping, every treat in its place! All right, I promise, and thank you.' Ruth took the parcel. 'I'll put it in my case. Goodness, it's heavy! What can it be?'

'It's not very exciting, but I hope you'll like it,' said Marjorie. The problem of what to give Ruth had exercised her for some time. Selecting her other presents, those for Robert, for the family, and for the Birdupps, had provided a welcome diversion, and an occupation that could be prolonged over several shopping trips to London and the big stores. She had enjoyed poring over glossy catalogues and weighing the relative merits of various offerings, but Ruth had been a puzzle. Bath salts seemed ordinary, a record or book-token impersonal, a pot-plant unimaginative. Marjorie was diffident about her ability to choose something apt for this new, enigmatic friend whose tastes were clearly sophisticated, definite and special. Then, browsing in an antique shop one day while she waited for the bus, she had discovered a small bronze eagle. It was

beautifully sculptured, its beak a snarling protest and its talons curled against the heavy lump of marble that formed its base. She had known at once, with certainty, that Ruth would like it and had carried it home in triumph, eager to display it to Robert. He had looked at it without much interest.

'Very nice. It's right for her,' he had said, and gone back to reading the paper. Marjorie had left untold the story of how cheap it was, because it had been covered in dust and forgotten in a corner of the shop.

Ruth weighed it in her palms. The situation was eerie; here she was, entertaining Robert's wife and receiving from her hands a gift with every appearance of friendship and goodwill, when for months, before they met, she had been obsessed with the aim of destroying Marjorie. The whole scheme had been a mad conception, born from an impulse when she was at the ultimate depth of despair. What a toil she was in: her motives changed now from day to day; even her feelings for Robert swung between a desire to wound and a wish to creep away, leaving him in undisturbed domestic peace.

She turned away from Marjorie and, in her turn, produced a package. From its shape it was clearly a picture.

'For you both,' she said, and brushed away Marjorie's thanks. It was a painting of the Fens which Robert had once admired against the white wall of her London flat. Here she had no room to hang it. He would remember seeing it before.

'Perhaps the weekend will be better than you think,' Marjorie said hopefully, tucking the big parcel under her arm. 'Anyway, whenever you get back, come in and have a drink.'

'I will,' Ruth promised.

For a moment she feared that Marjorie, packed with Christmas sentimentality and doubtless capable of the most unseemly display of emotion, might kiss her, but the moment passed.

'Happy Christmas,' Marjorie repeated, and left.

After she had gone, Ruth made no immediate move. She unwrapped the package which she had promised to keep until the next day and sat there, holding in her hands the sculptured eagle. It was perfect. She looked at it, moving it this way and that, to examine it from every angle. There was no flaw. For ten minutes

she sat there holding it, and wept.

9

"Hark the Herald Angels sing,

Glory to the Newborn King."

Robert sang lustily, his head thrown back, feet slightly apart, chest out. He did not know that his own voice was off key; what it lacked in accuracy of pitch it made up for in volume. Church services varied little from parish to parish; Robert's personal contribution varied not at all. This little Norman building was full today. Holly in banks decked the wide window sills; chrysanthemums were massed on the altar and before the pulpit. The vicar, a thin, ascetic-looking man, had for once preached a brief sermon, mainly about brotherly love and those less fortunate than ourselves gathered here today. Now, with the prospect of imminent release, the congregation's lungs expanded.

Robert was content. He had slept well, with Marjorie soft against him through the night. The evening had passed pleasantly, catching up on family news and discussing the wedding plans of Clive and Sarah. Now he looked forward to an uneventful few days, and with no possibility of Ruth suddenly appearing in Willerby House. He recognised that this was a fact that added to his peace of mind, and connected with it there was one niggling worry: he had yet to tell Clive, who knew Ruth, what had happened and secure his cooperation in the minor deception of Marjorie. Clive must be fixed, and speedily, in case in conversation Ruth should be mentioned.

Really, it was amazing how quickly he had grown to accept the new circumstances. Most evenings, Ruth travelled back on the same train as Robert, and he had developed a system of boarding it at the last minute in order to evade any possibility of sitting near her. It was a bore, but a necessary one, for he feared gossip, whatever his inclinations. He refused to speculate about these, but he could not refrain from wondering what her thoughts had been when she unwrapped the bronze eagle. She might wonder if he had chosen it.

Such reflections made him feel disloyal to Marjorie. He glanced sideways at her; she caught his eye, smiled, detached her hand from the hymn book held before her and squeezed his fingers for an instant, then resumed her former position.

'Peace on earth and mercy mild,

God and sinners reconciled.'

Marjorie's heart had given an unseemly jump at the contact with Robert; such reactions were not proper in church. She gazed earnestly at her hymn book, although the words they were singing were indelibly written in her memory, and tried not to think about the joy of the night before. Perhaps she was pregnant even at this moment. It could not be wrong to admit such a thought as this, on such a day. She sang on, her voice light and high, and smiled inwardly at the tuneless sound Robert was doggedly making beside her. Today she felt generous to everyone: the Waifs and Strays, for whom the collection would be taken; Mrs Birdupp, in her green felt hat, three pews behind; poor thin Mr Foster, the Vicar, who was a bachelor and looked it, half-starved and overconscientious, doomed to solitude in a gaunt Victorian vicarage where draughts and dust prevailed, and if discomfort earned salvation, he had surely won his crown. No doubt he had stayed up all night in a vigil of prayer after the midnight service; Marjorie thought he would do more good if he were plump and jolly; his pallor and austerity were a reproof, true, but no encouragement. All over England at this moment professing Christians in varying degrees were singing this hymn, truly gathered together and united. Uplifted by this vision, Marjorie sang

on, her thoughts soaring.

'Joyful all ye nations rise,

Join the triumph of the skies.'

Clive, like his brother, sang with head thrown back and chest extended, but more tunefully. He had once distinguished himself as a treble in his school choir, and still adopted various mannerisms acquired in those days.

His hymn book was held in both hands before him, and he took pains with his breathing and articulation. He hoped Sarah was impressed by his performance, and as he sang he marvelled at his situation. Despite an appearance of ease and ebullience, he was naturally diffident, and had never had Robert's success with women. As a young man, he had fallen deeply in love, but the girl had been killed in a motor accident and since then he had never become seriously involved with anyone. He met Sarah when she took a temporary post at the Ministry; after she left, by chance they encountered one another again at a party and from this began an undemanding friendship. Sarah was gay and pretty, and Clive was cast more in the role of father confessor than anything else. He was regaled with tales of her romances and conquests, gave no advice, felt avuncular, and dried her tears in due course. In time she seemed to grow more discriminating; Clive thought he detected, beneath the uncertain, restless girl, a warmhearted individual who needed security and understanding. As the months passed, his desire to provide these for her came into being and strengthened. He proposed to her more than once, in a lighthearted way for fear of being mocked. She never laughed at him, but seemed moved and grateful; at last it was she who raised the subject, and Clive still did not understand quite how it had all come about. Certainly he had planned nothing, but somehow or other Sarah had spent the night at his flat and by morning they were to be married. Now it seemed to him incredible that so much warmth, ardour and sheer youth should be his; he sang joyfully, thankfully. Dull men like himself did not deserve to win such a butterfly, but having done so, he

would cherish her. So he resolved, and sang on. They were to be married early in the New Year, with no fuss. Here he frowned, for Sarah was an agnostic and had come to church only to please him, but possibly time would alter her views; at any rate, he could hope so.

'With the angelic host proclaim

Christ is horn in Bethlehem'

Because she had received the benefits of an English upbringing, Sarah was familiar with the words of the carol. Despite her sentiments, she sang quietly from time to time, since standing silently seemed foolish, but it was not nearly so foolish as the uninhibited noise Clive and his brother were making. She wriggled her toes inside her shiny black patent boots and was mortified for the two men; they were making utter fools of themselves. What a charade this was. She gazed round at the holly and flowers, and the congregation in their good tweed coats with most of the women wearing fur hats of one quality or another. In her own view, she was the smartest woman present; her hat, though also fur, was white, and worn with a leopardskin coat. It did not occur to her that reflections about her appearance were not appropriate to the occasion; the whole thing was a bore anyway, but Clive seemed to mind about it, so why make it an issue? The whole idea of a family Christmas was rather exhausting, but since her own parents were abroad she had no excuse for avoiding it. All this carol-singing and togetherness was sentimental; it reminded her against her will of other years, now past, and she herself delving eagerly into a packed stocking, and singing these very words with great conviction.

One must advance and not look back: she knew that Clive would be a kind and reliable husband and that everyone thought her a fortunate girl; she was envied among her friends. He was established, so they need never be poor; she was confident of him, because for so long now he had been a constant feature in her life, to be picked up or discarded at will, sometimes a joke but always available. She enjoyed the sensation of power that came from this,

but fundamentally it was also an anchorage. She knew that they would complement one another, and that her own restless nature needed a partner more stable; this very contrast would help to prevent Clive, too, from becoming too sober. The old Brethertons were kindly, and reminded her of her grandparents; it would be no bad thing to settle down, abandon the frenetic pace of the last years and adopt the respectable mantle of matrimony. She saw herself giving chic dinners in Chelsea, dressed by Quant and talking wittily, with Clive a quiet shadow in the background.

Marjorie was nice; she was dull in some ways, of course, dowdy by Sarah's standards, and inclined to be sentimental as she enthused over Sarah's emerald engagement ring and lamented because the wedding was to be quiet, in a registrar's office, and not amid tulle in church. Clive thought a lot of Marjorie, Sarah knew; she had deplored it in advance since it might force them into contact, but now she saw that she might be pleased to have Marjorie vaguely in the background of her life. To Robert she gave no great thought; he was well-off and quite old. She supposed he had allure for Marjorie, but this was something she did not understand; he seemed genial and was Clive's brother: that was enough. Flutingly, she sang a bar or two and began to plan how she would make Clive get rid of his antique furniture so that they could be equipped with modem, functional pieces instead.

'Christ by Highest Heaven adored,

Christ the Everlasting Lord'

Old Mr Bretherton could barely sing at all now. He held his book in a shaky hand and mouthed the words, uttering an occasional sound at intervals. His legs felt weak, but he would not sit down; he was determined to last out this hymn. What a humiliation it was when the indomitable spirit had to bow to the frail flesh. These youngsters standing round him had no idea that the malfunctioning of an aged body had the power to drive all other thoughts from one's mind, until one concentrated solely on surviving the moment without physical disaster. This, happily, was not such a time, and

random thoughts flitted into his mind. What an odd little child this creature of Clive's was, to be sure. Old Mr Bretherton was vaguely aware of her white fur hat, a blob beside him.

She was not a bit like his other daughter-in-law, Marjorie: now there was a nice girl, easy and straightforward, not complicated at all, a good wife to Robert. This other one was quite a different kettle of fish, but presumably Clive, at his age, knew what he was doing. Elsie thought the girl would wake him up; she said that Marjorie was already letting Robert get pompous. Anyway, it was as well that the boy was getting married at last; even if the girl couldn't cook, as seemed all too likely, Clive at least could, as had often been proved during weekends in Norfolk. It seemed no time at all since both the boys were going off to school, small and solemn in green caps and grey overcoats. Now they were both successful men, and neither was young any more. It was hard to accept; too hard. He dwelt much more often on the days gone by than the difficult present with its altered standards and weird ways. His legs were aching, and images of the past left the old man's mind as his attention became riveted on the sole need to remain steadily erect for the remainder of the hymn.

'Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace,

Hail the Son of Righteousness …'

Elsie Bretherton knew that her husband had grown frail this winter. His share of the chores at home had now become a burden; perhaps there was something in this idea of Robert's that they should instal oil-fired heating in the Old Rectory. Certainly Willerby House was beautifully warm and she had not been so comfortable for years. But it would be very expensive, and at their ages such an outlay for what could only be a limited time seemed so extravagant. If anything were to happen to Arthur she would move into something smaller, perhaps a bungalow, which would be easy to manage as she, too, grew less active. But he was too old to uproot; he must be allowed to live out his days where every stick and stone in the place was familiar and beloved. Even the upheaval of packing up for

Christmas had been almost too much for him; he would never do it again. Elsie could see that her husband was swaying gently as he stood beside her, but she knew that he would not give in and sit down unless threatened by real collapse. He must be persuaded to go to bed after lunch; their bedroom was warm and snug and he could sleep there as cosily as in a chair by the fire, which was what he did at home. Robert must be doing very well to be able to live so comfortably; he seemed very happy with Marjorie, although he looked tired and must have a lot of business worries on his mind. Things had turned out luckily; she knew that he had been through some wild patches in his youth and been attracted by many less admirable women than Marjorie. It was odd that both boys had seemed drawn to gay, rather gaudy girls; yet Robert had chosen a steady one to marry, and perhaps Sarah too, in turn, would prove to have depth. She was still very young, and was certainly a modern; she would keep Clive up to the mark, at any rate. Which of them, herself or Arthur, had passed on the streak of inheritance that made Clive pursue Sarah and which had led Robert into unsuitable directions years ago? Nothing mattered really but that they should be happy; how worrying it was to be a mother, one never outgrew the anxious habit, even when the fledglings had flown and were building on their own.

This was a pleasant part of the world. Marjorie had confessed that she and Robert still felt very new and did not know many people yet, but in time they would make their mark. There was always, for Marjorie, the Women's Institute, and ultimately the Mothers' Union; it was to be hoped that before long a baby would be on the way. Young people seemed able to arrange these things very cleverly these days, but Robert was forty and it would be a pity to delay.

Elsie looked around the church and counted five different varieties of holly. There were splendid chrysanthemums ranged against the pulpit, their heads immense; she thought she knew the breed; they were massive, white and beautiful. Marjorie was interested in flowers; she hoped the gift of two dozen rose trees, which was her Christmas present to her daughter-in-law, would be welcome. Gardening was a great release as well as an absorption. No presents had yet been exchanged at Willerby House, for the morning had begun so late. By the time the dogs had been given a run after breakfast it was half-past ten. Luckily, Flash had so far not

snapped at Rory but had behaved with the utmost discretion. He had been left outside the church in Robert's car, since leaving both dogs alone together in the house might have invited a riot. Rory seemed resigned to the invasion and after a minute inspection of Flash had retreated to a comer under the sideboard in the dining-room, where he now remained aloof for most of the time.

'Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,

Born this happy morning,

The sound of clinking coins reminded the Brethertons of the demands of the moment. Respectively, they rummaged in pockets and purses and laid their various contributions on the plate when it was passed to them. The congregation sang on, heartily, and the two churchwardens paced slowly down the aisle with their offering. Pious thoughts were wholly abandoned and the minds of the parishioners of Haverbury turned into festive channels as in stately fashion they filed slowly from the church.

10

Sarah came into the kitchen when Marjorie was putting the turkey into the oven.

'Can I help?'

'Hullo! No, I don't think you can, there's nothing to do. I thought you'd gone for a walk.'

'It was too cold. I came back,' Sarah said. 'Shall I lay the table?'

'Oh, yes. We might as well get it done.' Marjorie shut the oven door and Sarah left the room as suddenly as she had come. Marjorie followed her into the dining-room, for with all her good intentions she could not know yet where everything was kept. The carpeted floor masked her footsteps, and she entered without being heard; Sarah, a clutch of spoons and forks held in one hand, was standing with her back to the room, motionless. Her long hair hung like a curtain of jet on her shoulders; in her black sweater and speckled tweed skirt she looked as thin as a child. Her attitude as she stood, shoulders drooping, was one of utter dejection.

Marjorie took it all in, and crossed to the sideboard.

'The mats live in here,' she said briskly, pulling open a drawer.

'Oh, yes. I forgot.'

Sarah turned and bent over the table. Her hair flopped forward and hid her face so that Marjorie could not be sure that in fact she had been crying. Clive and she must have had some sort of tiff that had ended their walk abruptly.

It seemed best to take no notice. Swiftly, Marjorie dealt the table mats round into their places, put out knives and glasses and fetched

the best table-napkins. Soon the table was ready, and while they worked she chattered to Sarah about anything that came into her head without waiting for any answer.

'There, that's done. Thanks so much, Sarah. Now we may as well put the kettle on, it's teatime.'

Sarah spoke at last.

'I don't really want any tea. I don't mean to be rude, but we haven't stopped eating since we've been here.'

Marjorie laughed.

'Lunch was quite frugal,' she said. In fact, they had eaten cold ham and salad, cheese and fresh fruit. 'But I agree. Still, that's what happens at Christmas, isn't it? Too much food and then frayed tempers.' As she said this, she thought of Ruth's remarks, and she could have wished the words unsaid as soon as they were uttered, for perhaps Clive was suffering from bad temper and had been unkind, though it seemed most unlikely. He had been hovering round Sarah all day like an attentive moth to a flame; it struck Marjorie suddenly that here was an apt simile and it typified what was disturbing about the romance: Sarah in fact was a flame and Clive a moth. It was a fanciful, foolish thought and she banished it.

'The parents will want tea, they're used to it,' she said. 'It helps to break up their day. And Clive and Robert will start screaming for whisky much too soon if we don't get some fluid into them now. We'll just have biscuits and scones, I won't produce cake.'

They went back to the kitchen and began loading the trolley with cups and saucers. Marjorie moved the kettle across the stove and it soon began to sing.

'Mrs. B. doesn't take sugar but he does,' she said, getting the bowl from the cupboard. 'We don't take it and I always forget to put it out for visitors.' She felt that it was vital to keep talking, however feebly, for Sarah looked as if her self-control might snap at any moment and must be given time to recover.

'They're dear old things. It must be awful to be so old,' said Sarah now, tritely, but at least making an effort to seem normal. She began to arrange ginger and bourbon biscuits in alternate rows on a plate.

'Better stick a few plain ones in too,' Marjorie said, sliding a packet of Rich Tea across the table. 'They don't seem to mind too

much,' she went on, in answer to Sarah's remark. 'They've had happy and successful lives, I suppose, and they're still fairly spry. I expect it's easier if you've achieved something, as long as you don't get too frail. Let's hope they'll never be.' She wished vaguely for both her parents-in-law to live in their present calm state until released by death without discomfort.

'He's a bit doddery,' Sarah said. 'He tottered out of church.'

'Yes, but she's as active as you or me. She can look after him all right. It would be worrying if he was on his own. They'll miss Clive after you're married, he's spent a lot of time at home. I don't suppose you'll go there all that often, will you?'

'I suppose not. I hadn't thought about it,' Sarah said flatly. Suddenly she burst out, 'Marjorie, were you frightened about getting married?' Across the table she faced the other girl, and her eyes were huge in her white, pointed little face.

'Frightened?'

Marjorie tried to remember. She stood, holding the teapot in both hands, considering. There was so much that might be alarming to someone of Sarah's age; modern young girls were supposed to think things out more clearly than earlier generations, but perhaps this was a myth. 'No, I don't think I was, except of letting Robert down by being inefficient,' she said slowly. 'I'm still afraid of that,' she added, and to herself, that she feared solitude, and being barren, and thunderstorms. 'But not afraid of marriage,' she affirmed. She had wanted desperately to marry Robert; this was certain. 'I was much older than you are. Of course that makes a difference.'

'I suppose it does.' After her sudden outburst, Sarah seemed to have retreated into herself again. 'Clive's an angel, I know,' she added.

'He's a dear,' Marjorie agreed. She looked doubtfully at Sarah, unsure of the wisest thing to say. 'I expect your nervousness will wear off while you're engaged,' she said. 'If not, why not wait a bit before you get married? Couldn't you put it off till the summer? It would give you more time to get used to the idea.' And time to change your mind, she added mentally. Perhaps Clive had swept this child off her feet; it was possible, though hard to imagine. Sarah did not seem the sort of girl to be swept against her will.

‘Oh, we couldn’t do that. We must get married soon,’ Sarah said. ‘Clive wants to,’ she added, as if to explain.

Marjorie said no more. It was no use forcing a confidence which might later be regretted; this was probably all a storm in a teacup which would blow over; if not, Clive at least had sense and perception and would sort things out.

‘The kettle’s boiling,’ she said.

Robert and Clive got to their feet when the two girls appeared in the sitting-room, wheeling the trolley. Robert moved slowly but Clive sprang up.

‘Ah, tea. Lovely,’ cried Mrs Bretherton senior.

‘More food! Marjorie, you’ll kill us with overeating!’ said Clive heartily, moving up to aid Sarah with her end of the trolley.

‘Good, tea. I’m dry as a bone after all that ham,’ was Robert’s contribution to this welcome.

With the trolley safely parked in front of the hearth, Clive now put his arm round Sarah. She moved away and out of his reach.

‘Father’s still upstairs. Would you mind if I took his up, Marjorie? I expect he’s awake,’ said Mrs Bretherton.

‘I’ll take it up, Mrs Bretherton. Do let me, please,’ begged Sarah. ‘He won’t mind, will he?’

‘Oh, thank you, Sarah dear. Of course he won’t mind,’ said Mrs Bretherton.

Sarah stood poised for instant flight while Mr Bretherton’s tea was prepared according to his liking. Then she set off, bearing it in one hand and a plate with two plain biscuits on it in the other. Clive sprang to open the door for her.

‘I’ll pop up and open Father’s door for you, you haven’t a spare hand,’ he said.

‘Don’t bother, I can manage,’ Sarah replied brusquely.

‘It’s no bother,’ Clive assured her. Agonised, Marjorie was reminded of Rory wagging his tail, eager to please, as she watched Clive.

‘I said, I can manage, thank you,’ Sarah repeated in a high, taut voice. She was not looking at Clive. Her attention was directed to what she held in her hands, and her hair screened her face from the people in the room.

‘Oh, very well.’ Clive’s voice went flat and he stood back from the door. The three by the fireside exchanged glances and Marjorie began hastily to make a great business of pouring out tea for everyone else. Robert handed round scones busily.

‘What delicious scones! Did you make them, Marjorie? Clive, dear, come and try one of Marjorie’s scones,’ said Mrs Bretherton.

Clive crossed to the fireplace. He had not heard.

‘Clive, two sugar lumps or three?’ Marjorie stood with hand poised over the bowl. Everyone now seemed to be watching him.

‘Oh, I don’t mind. I mean, sorry, just two,’ he said distractedly. ‘Thanks, Marjie.’ He was the only person who called her by this diminutive, a custom he had begun early in their acquaintance. He took the cup from her hand and sank down on the sofa, sipping absently.

By the time Sarah came back everyone was seated and the only space left for her was beside Clive. She stared at the empty place with undisguised reluctance. Clive had by this time sprung to his feet again and begun to hover.

Marjorie took one look at Sarah’s face and sprang up too.

‘Sarah, come by the fire, you look cold,’ she said. ‘I haven’t poured your tea out yet. How do you like it? Weak and watery or good and strong and black?’ She moved the trolley away from her seat near the fire and pushed it towards the sofa. Without waiting for Sarah’s answer she poured out a cup of strong tea and gave it to the girl, who immediately took the vacated chair. Then Marjorie sat down herself, next to Clive. She pretended not to see the look of reproach he bent on her.

‘Who wants another scone?’ she asked.

Later on, when at last they were alone in their bedroom, changing for dinner, Robert wanted to know what was wrong between Clive and Sarah.

‘Goodness knows. Just a tiff, I expect,’ Marjorie said. ‘Sarah seemed a bit edgy before tea. Perhaps they had words on their walk.’

‘Clive seemed to spend most of the afternoon messing about with his car. Probably she got fed up,’ said Robert.

At this moment, Clive was in the bath. Sarah had vanished after

tea and was assumed to be resting in her room. The elder Brethertons, already changed, were sitting peacefully downstairs sipping sherry, he glancing at *Punch* and she deep in *Larkrise to Candleford* for the umpteenth time.

'Your mother and I never saw either of them,' said Marjorie. 'We went over by the chalk quarry. The dogs were very well-behaved together. But we weren't out long because I had to get the turkey in.'

Robert had refused to take exercise that afternoon. Amid protests, he had declared that he must prepare a company report, but in fact he fell asleep by the fire, and when his mother and his wife returned' to the house the volume which lay on the floor beside him was no company document but the latest James Bond adventure.

'Funny sort of girl, that Sarah, isn't she?' Robert said. 'Too modern by half. She reminds me of Miss Parkinson at the office. Shouldn't have thought she was Clive's cup of tea at all.'

'She's rather sweet, I think,' Marjorie defended her. 'But she seems very young. I didn't like to ask her how old she is, in fact. Perhaps they're suffering from anticlimax, they must have had rather an exciting time lately.'

'Well, I hope they make it up soon. Jolly weekend we'll have if they don't,' said Robert gloomily.

'Poor Clive, he looks wretched,' Marjorie said. 'I don't wonder. She couldn't seem to bear him to touch her.'

'Well, that's a good start, I must say,' said Robert. 'If you ask me, the whole thing's doomed. But perhaps she's one of those females who lead their men a dance by withholding their favours. A kind of blackmail.'

'What, so soon! And what do you know about such things, anyway,' Marjorie demanded. She came up to him and tweaked the end of his tie.

'Not much, really,' said Robert, with a grin. He caught her in his arms. Her eyes were shining and she laughed up at him as he kissed her. Suddenly, unbidden, he remembered Ruth, who for an instant had seemed to threaten blackmail of a sort. He had not yet seen Clive alone; foolishly, after lunch he had let it go and failed to seek his brother out. He must make an opportunity without delay. As if

to compensate for his own guilt, Robert held Marjorie still more closely against him and tried to exclude all other thoughts from his mind.

Some time later, when Clive came downstairs, Robert called him from the dining-room.

'Lend me a hand with these bottles, Clive, will you? Then I'll get you a drink.'

Clive, who had hoped to find Sarah in the drawingroom, looked rather cross, but came meekly enough to his brother's bidding.

'Do you know much about burgundy? I've just bought a case of this.' Robert displayed two crusty-looking bottles for inspection.

'Hm, should be all right. I don't really know, though.

I just buy the odd bottle and usually go by the price,' said Clive.

'You'll have to take more trouble when you're married. It pays to buy in quantity,' Robert told him portentously. 'I'll introduce you to my wine merchant.'

Clive saw no reason to move his custom from the off-licence near his present flat, which had served him well for years.

'No doubt your advice is invaluable, Robert,' he said. 'Now, what do you want me to do?'

'Would you draw these corks, please. I meant to do it before changing. Still, they'll have half an hour or so before we dine.'

Clive obediently picked up the corkscrew and began to insert it into one of the corks. Robert must be getting very helpless if he needed aid for this task.

'You're doing us well, Robert. It's very good of you,' he said, to pass the time, but meaning it.

'It's quite an occasion, having all the family together. Anyway, I hope we always do our guests well.' He cleared his throat. 'Clive, I wanted to get hold of you for a minute on your own. The wine was just an excuse.' Moving quietly, Robert crossed the room and closed the door. Clive, intent on getting the cork out in one piece, paid no heed. He began extracting it slowly.

'Clive!' Robert, nerves taut because at last he had brought himself to the point of speaking to Clive, could brook no inattention now.

'Yes, old man, just a minute. Ah, there she comes!' With

satisfaction, Clive eased the cork successfully out of the bottle and sniffed it. ‘Jolly good, I’d say at a guess. Now what was it you said?’

‘Here, give me that.’ Exasperated, Robert snatched back the corkscrew and the second bottle from Clive before he could begin another operation.

‘Clive, listen to me. I’m in a bit of a spot,’ he said. ‘Do you remember Ruth Castle?’

‘Do I not! Your old flame! Of course I remember her, she’d be hard to forget,’ said Clive. ‘What about her?’

‘Well, she lives here,’ Robert said.

Clive looked about, as if to see Ruth appear in the corner.

‘Here? Where?’ he asked.

‘In the village. She’s bought a cottage up the road,’ said Robert.

‘Has she, indeed?’ Clive looked thoughtful. ‘And that could be awkward.’ Suddenly his face hardened. ‘What are you up to, you devil? What about Marjie?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not up to anything. Do you think I’d have married Marjorie if I was still carrying on with Ruth? That’s all over. No, this has happened completely by chance. Anyway, Ruth and Marjorie chummed up together before I had an opportunity to explain. I’ve never told Marjorie, she’s got no idea we ever knew one another before.’

‘I always thought you’d marry Ruth in the end,’ said Clive.

‘So did she. That was why I sheered off,’ Robert said drily. ‘The point is, Marjorie mustn’t find out.’

‘She must expect you to have had a fling or two at your age, surely,’ said Clive.

‘Heavens, yes. But she doesn’t know in what specific direction, and if she finds out about Ruth she’ll think all sorts of things because I didn’t tell her straight away,’ said Robert. ‘So I want you to keep quiet too. If Ruth is ever mentioned, pretend you haven’t heard of her. I can trust you, Clive, can’t I?’

‘Is Ruth a party to this deception too?’

‘Yes. She quite understands. She’s been a brick. In fact, she and Marjorie are very friendly already. I rather wish they weren’t, to tell you the truth,’ Robert confessed. He took out his handkerchief and began to mop at his forehead. ‘Phew, it’s a relief to have told

someone,' he admitted.

'Very likely. I'm glad I'm not you, handling this one,' said Clive. 'Marjorie's bound to find out one day, and then what will happen?'

'I don't see why she should. Ruth probably won't always be here. She'll marry or something,' said Robert, wishfully.

'This can only lead to trouble,' said Clive. 'But I promise you I'll do nothing to hurt Marjie. She's worth a hundred of Ruth any day. You're too bloody lucky.' He looked at his brother and his face was grim. 'What about Mother and Father? They didn't know about Ruth, did they?'

'No, thank goodness. It always pays to be discreet about these things,' said Robert.

'You ass, Robert. You ought to have told Marjorie straight away, she's sensible, she'd have got used to the idea quite quickly.'

'I tell you I couldn't. The way it happened made it impossible,' said Robert impatiently. 'Anyway, I'm glad I've managed to put you in the picture.'

'You haven't really, you deep-dealing blackguard,' said Clive. 'Still, the less I know the better, probably. I've got quite enough trouble of my own just now.'

'Oh, yours will blow over,' Robert assured him. There was no point in seeming not to understand, since a blind man could have detected trouble. 'I suppose you had words this afternoon. Why don't you grab her and make violent love to her, that'll soon put things right.'

'We didn't have words. She wouldn't talk at all,' said Clive bleakly. 'And as for making love to her, you must have seen for yourself that she can't bear me near her.'

'It'll pass,' Robert said. 'Give it time. Women have these moods. You've got a lot to learn.'

11

Boxing Day was cold and crisp. The sun shone thinly in the clear, pale sky; after frost in the night, a fine white rime clung to the bare-branched trees, the spikes of grass, the twigs in the hedgerows; and the puddles left by the rain were filmed across with ice. Rory, let out early, enjoyed a spell of solitude in the garden amid familiar smells before Flash was released to join him. Marjorie, who had woken at her usual hour, pottered contentedly about downstairs in her dressing-gown, putting the coffee on and laying the table for breakfast before she dressed. While she was setting out honey and marmalade on a tray, Clive came into the kitchen. He was haggard and unshaven; obviously his night had not been restful.

'Hullo, Marjie, good morning. You're always working, let me help.'

'I'm not doing much more, but thanks. You're early.'

'I couldn't sleep. Here, let me do that. I feel like an idle parasite.' He picked up a packet of butter she had just taken from the refrigerator and began to unwrap it. 'Butter in a lordly dish, and so on.'

'It won't spread, unless everyone's so late that it has time to thaw. I usually leave some in the larder.'

'Sarah put the whole lot away when we were washing-up last night,' said Clive. 'I mentioned the matter, but she argued, so I let it go. Sorry. I know you never do things without a reason.'

Marjorie laughed.

'I'm not so sure. Still, never mind, what does it matter? Clive, be a dear and give the boiler a shake, will you? Since you seem to be

looking for employment.'

'No sooner said than done. Shall I deal with the other fires too? Might as well be useful. Robert doesn't seem to be about.'

'He's still asleep. And don't you be such a martyr,' said Marjorie.

'I'm sorry, Marjie. I don't mean to be, it's just that I'm a bit all ends up.'

'I know you are. Don't think me unsympathetic, but this is something no one should presume to interfere with. In other words, it's your business and Sarah's, and no one else's.'

'Marjie, I believe you've always known just what to do in your life when you've had a choice,' said Clive. She seemed to him a very certain sort of person, but suddenly he remembered Robert's disclosure of the night before and Marjorie's total ignorance of the part Ruth had played, in the past. She was, in fact, cruelly vulnerable. His heart softened towards her.

'I don't know about that,' she was saying. 'I'm weak, I take the easiest way.' She smiled at him across the little space that separated them.

He said, hesitantly, 'I think I may be making a frightful mistake.'

She moved at once, and laid a finger across his lips.

'Don't say it till you're sure,' she warned. 'Give it time. If you admit something, it's recognised and you've got to act. Don't decide in a hurry.'

He caught her hand and held it, looking down at her. Quite suddenly, without their conscious thought, the atmosphere between them became charged with intensity. Marjorie was acutely aware of Clive, somewhat dishevelled, in his maroon dressing-gown, standing very close to her.

'Marjorie?' His voice was puzzled, and he moved nearer. Their hands were still linked. The colour left Marjorie's face; she had lost all power of movement and stayed motionless as he laid his other hand gently on her arm. There was an instant's indecision, just a moment when either of them might have drawn back, and then it was too late.

When at last they moved apart, Marjorie was trembling. In silence they stepped back from one another. Then Clive said, gruffly, 'I'll see to the fire,' and blundered from the room, stumbling

over Rory's bowl of drinking water as he went.

Marjorie went to the sink and sluiced her burning face with cold water. Her mind could not accept what had happened. She banged about, laying a tray of early-morning tea things for the old Brethertons. Clive could be heard rattling and scraping with the sitting-room grate. She kept her head bent so that she would not see him when he came back into the kitchen carrying a bucket of dead ashes and went out through the back door to the dustbin. When he returned, R.ory followed, and braver now, Marjorie did look at Clive, her eyes full of appeal.

He put his bucket down and came slowly to her.

'Whatever happened to us?' she asked.

Clive said nothing for a moment. Then he took her gently by the arms again.

'Dear Marjorie,' he said at last. 'I know you love Robert with all your heart. Let's just say Christmas has been a bit much for some of us.' With tenderness, he kissed her again. Her lips, soft and warm, parted once more at his touch, but he let her go before another rush of feeling could flood them both. Then he picked up his bucket and moved across to attack the boiler.

At this moment, luckily, the kettle started to boil, and Marjorie occupied herself making her mother-in-law's tea. She put the pot on the tray and went upstairs with it, without another glance at Clive. Perhaps a calm mind would return to her with the performance of simple daily chores and the assumption of her clothes.

Everyone straggled down to breakfast. Robert was in a hearty mood. His mind was easy, for he had no urgent problems with which to grapple in the immediate future, his body was rested, and it was easy to be the expansive host. He went on drinking coffee, smoking, and talking to the others as they appeared. Marjorie ate a piece of toast quickly and then vanished with a second cup of coffee into the kitchen, where she made herself very busy with preparations for lunch. Gradually she managed to put out of her mind the memory of the disturbing scene that had happened earlier. She explained it away to herself by remembering that Clive was naturally upset by Sarah's contrariness, and of course they were fond of each other; nothing serious had passed between them, and no damage had been done. More sophisticated folk than they took

such encounters very lightly; in this case it was best forgotten. Very soon, she almost persuaded herself that it had never happened at all.

Sarah was the last person down to breakfast. She had an ashen face, refused all food, and merely drank a cup of very strong coffee. Her elders were, on the whole, glad to see that she was not unaffected by her own bad conduct, but when Clive asked her if she had slept well and offered to pour her another cup, she snapped at him crossly and turned her back.

'What's the matter with everyone today?' Robert wanted to know, coming into the kitchen at last. By this time Marjorie had finished preparing vegetables for lunch, and was beginning to wash up the breakfast. 'Clive and Sarah are both off their food, and even you seem rather quiet, my love.'

'I'm very busy,' Marjorie told him. 'Here, you can help me,' and she gave him a tea-towel. 'I expect the others had a bit too much to drink last night,' she said.

'Maybe. How silly they are. We'd better pack them off somewhere on their own to sort things out.'

Marjorie still held to her view that time could put most things in perspective.

'It would be a pity if they did anything hasty,' she said. 'Why don't we dilute the family down a bit? Perhaps Philip and Joan would come over? They may all have overeaten too and be glad of an outing.'

'That's a good idea. I'll go and ring Philip,' said Robert, putting down his tea-towel with all speed. He kissed her ear, and went eagerly off to the telephone, calling as he went to Clive to help with the washing-up.

In the end it was Sarah who came to assist. Her colour slowly returned as she wiped dry the silver and crockery, and then, somewhat shamefacedly, sat down at the kitchen table to a large bowl of cornflakes. Into this scene entered Robert, to say that the Newton children were so busy disporting themselves on their ponies that they could not be prised away, and that the Willerby House contingent was bidden to visit Pendleford instead.

So, before lunch, they set off, even the elder Brethertons, who remembered Philip from years back. Rory came, and Flash too.

They were left in separate cars outside the Newtons' pleasant mock-Georgian house. As everyone clambered from the cars, a small child could be seen in a distant field, cantering round on a chestnut pony. Sarah, an arresting figure in her tight black trousers and thick sweater worn under a white mohair cape, stood watching this spectacle with absorption. She had refused to travel in Clive's car, with him and his parents, insisting on crouching in the back of Robert's with Rory spread out beside her. Now her outfit was plastered with long black hairs shed from his coat.

Joan Newton and her eldest daughter came from the house to greet them; Philip and two more girls appeared from the back yard, leading two ponies. There was a confusion of introductions, and eventually the company was sorted out. Joan led the old Brethertons into the drawingroom, which was cluttered with books, magazines, piles of Christmas wrapping paper, and a collection of miscellaneous, recently exchanged gifts. She made no attempt to apologise for the muddle, but ignored it; very soon, her guests forgot to notice it, as chairs were cleared and they sat down. Philip bustled about, looking vainly for tonic water and beer, and eventually led Robert away to the back regions to help him fetch supplies. In due time they came back, laden with bottles and trays and wearing large grins as if they had already sampled some drink outside.

Dinah, the eldest Newton girl, sat on the floor at the feet of Mrs Bretherton and showed her a book she had been given for Christmas. It was about Greece and sculpture, as alien a subject to the old lady as her books about botany would have been to the girl. Nevertheless, she looked with great interest at the many illustrations and made opportunity for the informed young woman to display some of her considerable knowledge. Old Mr Bretherton, seated in much too low a chair, stared about, trying to adjust to the new environment and knowing very well that he had no hope of understanding who everyone was. This girl, now, talking to Elsie; in some way she might be Sarah's sister—no, that was wrong. There were those others outside, with ponies, too. It was confusing. He gave up, and looked at the hearthrug instead; it was a very nice hearthrug, Persian, in fact, though shabby.

Marjorie and Clive found themselves seated once again together, on a sofa. Simultaneously, they became aware that Sarah was

missing.

‘She’s with the girls, she seemed interested in the ponies,’ Philip said, when Clive expressed some concern about her whereabouts.

‘How nice of her,’ said Joan comfortably. She was a large, untidy woman, wearing a shaggy purple sweater and a fluffy tweed skirt. She handed round cigarettes and took one herself. ‘What a horsey time we’re having here. The twins had new bridles for Christmas, and Rosemary had a girth and a halter.’

‘It’s just a phase,’ Dinah said. ‘It’ll wear off. I had it too.’

‘It’s quite a good phase,’ said her mother mildly. ‘I’m waiting to see what your next one will be.’

‘Oh, who knows? Perhaps I’ll go beat,’ said Dinah idly. She twisted a lock of her hair. ‘It depends on the crowd I mix with at college, I expect.’

‘If you get to college.’

‘I will,’ said the girl. She looked confident and clever, and about Sarah’s age, though in fact she must be several years younger. She got to her feet, took her book away from Mrs Bretherton, and sauntered over to the window.

‘Just look at those kids. They’re jumping now. You’d think they’d have had enough after two solid hours. Poor ponies, I bet they have, at least. Goodness, they’ve got your friend riding Tickles! Look at her!’

The others, with the exception of old Mr Bretherton, crowded to the window. Sure enough, in the distant paddock, Sarah could now be seen, mounted on one of the ponies, her hair and her cape flying out behind her as she galloped round.

‘She can ride, too,’ added Dinah, respectfully.

Sarah, indeed, looked most competent. As they watched, she faced her pony at one of the made-up fences in the field, and soared over in professional style.

‘She looks most expert. How nice to see her enjoying herself,’ said Mrs Bretherton, and resumed her seat. Clive and Marjorie exchanged glances, and he shrugged. They went back to their sofa and sat silently, holding their drinks, trying to look interested in the talk of the others. Presently conversation became easier and more general, and it was quite a surprise when the door opened to admit

Sarah, followed by the three younger Newton girls. All four had pink and glowing faces, and a fine tang, combined from various ingredients such as saddle-soap, manure, and sheer, plain horse, filled the room, brought with them from the stables. Sarah accepted a large gin-and-tonic; the girls asked for cokes, and all of them went on with a very fascinating conversation about technical horse matters which had obviously been begun outside. Sarah seemed to be giving advice; the girls plied her with questions. After their first amused smiles, everyone else picked up their own topics where they had left off, except for Clive, who glanced across at Sarah now and then with a worried expression. She continued to talk, pretty and gay now, and very attractive; and completely oblivious of him.

12

Flash danced round Mrs Bretherton, yapping, and wagging his stump of a tail.

‘Yes, boy, I know you want your walk. I’m coming,’ said Mrs Bretherton. She patted the little dog. ‘He’s much calmer and more sensible these days, Clive, don’t you think? That tonic’s done him good.’

‘Mother’s been dosing Flash with Sanatogen for his nerves,’ Clive told Marjorie and Sarah, who were the only other people in the room. Mr Bretherton had once again retreated to his bed after lunch, and Robert had vanished into his study.

‘Really? Have you? And has it done him good?’ Marjorie looked down at the patient quizzically.

‘Indeed it has,’ Mrs Bretherton declared proudly. ‘He was very jumpy and thin. Now he’s becoming quite sedate. It’s cumulative in effect, you know. He’s been having it for almost a month. I shall leave it off soon and see how he is.’

‘I’d never have thought of giving a dog something like that,’ Marjorie said.

‘If you’d like to rest, Mrs Bretherton, I’ll take Flash out,’ Sarah offered now. She seemed very restless, as though a course of Sanatogen might not come amiss to her.

‘Oh, would you like to, Sarah?’ Mrs Bretherton was longing for exercise, and looked rather crestfallen. ‘It’s very kind of you.’

‘He’d go with me, wouldn’t he? He isn’t a one-man dog, is he?’

‘Oh, he’d go with you all right, Sarah, I’m sure. He doesn’t like

men much, it's no good Clive trying to take him, but he seems to like most women. Clive will go with you, of course.'

It was a statement, not a query.

'Rather,' said Clive. 'Shall we start now?'

Sarah said, desperately, 'Marjorie, won't you and Rory come too?'

Marjorie raised her brows slightly. It was true that Rory must be taken out.

'Very well,' she said. She looked at her mother-in-law in a defeated way, unable to see an alternative. 'Robert had better come too,' she decided. 'I'll find him.'

Eventually they set off, and Mrs Bretherton watched them from the window as they walked four abreast up the lane, with the dogs, meek and docile, at their heels. When they had been gone ten minutes she left the house herself, and began to walk briskly down the road in the other direction, striding out in her thick shoes, warm woollen stockings and worn sheepskin jacket, with a paisley scarf tied over her wispy white hair.

The others, leaving the village behind, struck away up a bridle track that led towards the quarry where Mrs Bretherton and Marjorie had walked the day before. This and the river walk were two of Marjorie's favourites, and she often came along here with Rory. The lane was wet in places, and slippery, where it had thawed; it was impossible to keep together and Sarah strode rapidly in front. Clive stepped out after her, slithering about as he strove to keep pace with her. Marjorie and Robert went more slowly, falling back to let the other two get far enough ahead to talk without being overheard. Rory sniffed about, never far away, and Flash ran on in front, an excited white dot eagerly exploring.

Robert grumbled for a time. He had not wanted to come out, and had protested bitterly, but his temper improved as he inhaled the fresh, cold air; he took Marjorie's hand and admitted that she had been right to persuade him. They walked along, not talking much, but content, forgetting the pair in front until they heard shrill cries of 'Flash, Flash, come here, Flash,' from Sarah. Flash had vanished down the winding track into the quarry, and Sarah, pursuing, disappeared too. Marjorie and Robert stood still, watching, as Clive broke into a lumbering run after her. Then they turned to look at

each other, and laughed.

'Let them go. I expect they'll find Flash between them,' said Robert. 'We'll take this path.' He led Marjorie off to the right, so that their way lay past the quarry and over the fields.

'Your mother was most frustrated at being done out of her walk,' said Marjorie. 'I suppose she felt she must accept Sarah's offer, so kindly made.'

'If I know Mother, she's gone off on her own by another route,' said Robert. 'What a silly girl Sarah is. Clive must be out of his mind. The whole thing will be off by tonight, you see if it isn't.'

'Sarah certainly seemed a different person at the Newtons' this morning,' Marjorie said. 'She was among her own age group, or more nearly than with us, for a start.'

'She's a pretty little piece, I can see why Clive's attracted to her, but he'll wreck his life if he marries her,' said Robert. 'Come on. If we hurry, we can make the circuit and be home for a bit of peace long before anyone else gets back.'

From the top of the hill they looked down, Rory beside them with his tail moving like a pendulum. Far' below in the distance a white dot could be seen running: across the stubble field at the side of the quarry: Flash had emerged, and was still chasing whatever had lured' him on. While they watched, the figure of Sarah, matchstick black legs and white cape above, appeared from the trees at the top of the quarry. She must have climbed out along one of the various tracks that wound down its sides. Clive, clearly less agile, took some seconds to come into view. They saw him start running in pursuit of her across the field. After a time he slowed up, and then dropped into a walk. Sarah still ran on, and so did Flash, a long way in the lead. Their figures looked like dolls from such a distance.

At length Robert and Marjorie went on, and they could no longer see the others, but when they rounded the side of the hill ten minutes later, Clive was visible walking alone in a different direction, with his head down and his hands in his pockets.

'He's let her go. Well done. He's made a big enough ass of himself as it is,' said Robert.

'Well, I hope she catches Flash, or we'll all be out in the dark searching for him,' said Marjorie. 'Neither of them knows their way

about here, after all.'

'Surely Flash can sniff out the route,' said Robert. 'And Sarah is allegedly adult. She won't get lost.'

'I hope you're right. Anyway, don't let's panic yet,' Marjorie agreed.

They got home to find the house quiet and peaceful. Soon they had poked up the fire and settled down on the sofa together, with Schubert's Ninth Symphony on the record player, and a box of chocolates beside them. Robert put his arm round Marjorie and drew her head against his shoulder.

'It's a fine thing when you have to break into a run, and scheme to be alone in your own house with your own wife,' he said. 'Darling, I'm longing to take you away, all on our own. We'll have a wonderful holiday, I promise you.'

'Yes, we will' Though hardly solitary, Marjorie thought, thinking of the crowds waiting for the ski train up the mountains, the jostle to get seats, the struggle to put skis in the truck in front. In the rush of the last week she had almost forgotten that they were going to Switzerland in less than a month. Now, with a sigh of happiness, she remembered, and her mind became filled with visions of great mountain peaks, brilliant blue skies, and the crisp scrunch of the snow under her boots. It was another world, and in it they would be drawn closer together than ever before, for there need not be intruders.

They were both almost dozing when the door opened softly and Mrs Bretherton came in. She looked guiltily at them.

'I didn't think anyone was back, it was so quiet,' she said. She was still in her outdoor clothes…

'Hullo, Mother. Had a nice walk?' Slowly Robert began to unwind himself, in order to stand up.

'Don't get up, dear. Where are the others? And Flash? Have they made up their silly quarrel, whatever it was? I sneaked off the other way, I didn't think you'd be back yet.'

'We guessed you would. No, they aren't back yet, we left them on their own,' said Robert, suppressing the part that Flash had played in the afternoon's events.

'Oh, how wise. Well, I'll just pop up and change my shoes,' said Mrs Bretherton.

‘I’ll go and put the kettle on,’ Marjorie said, stirring in her turn.

‘I should stay where you are while you can,’ said her mother-in-law. ‘You look very peaceful there, the pair of you. Make the most of it.’

‘Yes, darling. Relax,’ said Robert. ‘Tea can wait till everyone’s present.’ He sank back again and collected her up once more into the crook of his arm.

Mrs Bretherton did not return for some time, and when she came back to the room she settled down in an armchair by the fire and took out her knitting. She was making socks for her husband, who abhorred nylon and only wore hand-knitted wool. Some time later the back door opened and closed. Rory got up and began to sniff round enquiringly, and presently Clive came in.

‘Where’s Sarah? Isn’t she back?’ he demanded, looking round.

‘Isn’t she with you? Where’s my Flash?’ Mrs Bretherton put down her knitting and sat up alertly.

Clive related in a few concise sentences how Flash had got on the scent of a rabbit and disappeared, deaf to the cries of the pursuing Sarah.

‘I let them go on, they were miles in front of me, it was useless trying to catch them,’ said Clive. ‘Sarah scrambled up out of that quarry like a mountain goat.’

‘We watched you scampering over the meadows,’ said Robert. ‘We were up on the hill. You looked very comic, I can tell you.’

‘Very likely,’ said Clive shortly. ‘It was quite clear that I would not be allowed to help in any way. So I packed it in.’

‘Quite right, old man. Hang on to what shreds of dignity are left to you.’

‘Oh, dry up, Robert. I just wasn’t wanted, that’s all,’ said Clive.

‘But will Sarah be all right? And what about Flash?’ Mrs Bretherton really was anxious.

‘They’ll be all right, Mother. If they kept straight on in the direction they were last going, they’d strike the road. Otherwise, Sarah would recognise where she was and come back the way we went. If she really gets lost on some strange road she’ll telephone, surely.’

‘Well, I hope you’re right. It’s getting dark and they don’t know

the district,' said Mrs Bretherton. She looked at the window, where the sky showed navy-blue outside in contrast to the lighted room.

'I'll get tea. We may as well have ours,' Marjorie said.

They did not talk much during tea. Once again, Mr Bretherton had his upstairs, and it was hoped that Sarah would be back before her absence had to be explained to him. But by five o'clock the others all admitted their concern. Robert and Clive put on boots and thick coats, found torches and sticks, and set off again, with Rory, to cover the afternoon's route.

'She could be doing this on purpose, just to be difficult,' Robert said to Clive. 'On the other hand, she might have come back through the quarry and fallen.'

Clive was rather white.

'I shouldn't have left her,' he said.

'Never mind that now,' said Robert. 'Stick to essentials.'

'Shall I come with you?' Marjorie asked.

'You'll be more use here, in case she gets back under her own steam, or rings up. But better be ready with kettles and things, just in case.'

Thiy went off, purposefully, into the darkness. Marjorie and her mother-in-law cleared up the tea together.

'She'll turn up,' Mrs Bretherton said. 'She's doing this to punish Clive in some way, as Robert suggested.'

'Very likely? It seemed all too probable, but Sarah was foolish rather than spiteful, and Marjorie could not avoid the fear that some accident had befallen her. At best, she must be lost, tired, cold and frightened.

An hour dragged slowly by. Marjorie and her mother-in-law sat talking. They discussed the problems of Clive and Sarah and reached no very great decisions; then old Mr Bretherton came downstairs and had to be told the facts. He was rested now, and his mind worked clearly, so that he grasped what had been happening during the afternoon without difficulty.

At half-past six a car drew up outside.

Marjorie reached the front door in a minute, thoughts of ambulances rushing through her mind. She did not know what she expected to find, but certainly not Ruth, whose dark blue Triumph

Herald it was.

Ruth was already extricating her long legs from behind the wheel.

‘I’ve brought one of your visitors back,’ she said. ‘We met in the wilds?

From the far side of the car another figure now appeared, and a rather grey bundle with wagging tail that turned out to be Flash came pattering into the house. Sarah did not look a whit abashed.

‘Flash was so naughty, he wouldn’t come when I called, and I had to run miles after him,’ she said. ‘In the end we came to a road, and I caught him, and I thumbed a lift. This lady said she knew you?

‘Ruth, how lucky it was you! But I didn’t think you were coming back till tomorrow?

‘I wasn’t, but I changed my mind,’ said Ruth. ‘Maybe it was as well.’

Marjorie, in her relief that Sarah was unhurt, fought an impulse to give the girl a good scolding for being so tiresome and worrying everybody.

‘We were afraid you’d got lost, Sarah,’ she said. ‘I expect you’re cold, aren’t you? Come along in, both of you? She hustled Ruth and Sarah into the house. Mrs Bretherton had hurried into the hall at the sound of voices, and was exclaiming over Flash and his dirty appearance.

‘I am a bit chilly. I’ll go and have a bath, if that’s all right,’ said Sarah.

‘It’s a good idea,’ Marjorie said. ‘The water’s nice and hot?

Sarah went upstairs, whistling, and Marjorie took Ruth into the sitting-room, where she introduced her to Robert’s parents.

‘Ruth, let me get you a drink. You’ll stay to supper, of course,’ Marjorie said. Ruth needed no urging. Her meeting with Sarah had been fortuitous; in any event she had intended to go down to Willerby House, for had she not been told to come round as soon as she returned? She had been able to stay away no longer.

Robert and Clive did not return for another half-hour; they had vainly scoured the quarry and the neighbouring fields. Robert, like Marjorie, recognised Ruth’s car the instant that he saw it parked

outside Willerby House, so that the men had a few moments' warning before they saw her, seated by the sitting-room fire, smoking, with a large glass of gin and tonic in her hand. They did not speak to her, but addressed the room in general.

'We haven't found her. There's not a sign of her, perhaps we should ring the police.' This was Clive, who looked dreadful; his face was almost green.

'We could try the hospitals first,' doubtfully from Robert.

'It's all right.' Marjorie got up and crossed the room. She put a hand on Clive's arm. 'She's back. Ruth met her and brought her home. You don't know Ruth, she's our neighbour.' She turned. 'Ruth, this is Robert's brother Clive. Mrs Castle.'

'Hullo, Clive,' said Ruth. She stretched in her chair, lazily, like a cat. 'How very nice to see you after all this time.' She looked from one startled brother to the other. 'Isn't this fun? I wouldn't have missed meeting you again for the world.'

Her gaze moved to Robert and rested there. It was Clive who watched Marjorie, and saw her face assume an expression of bewilderment.

'Have you two met, then? You never said so.'

'No, I never did, did I?' Ruth replied. She looked back again at Clive and smiled. 'We've met many times, haven't we, Clive? And thereby hangs quite an interesting tale.'

13

In the morning, Clive drove up to London and took Robert with him, for both must return to their desks. Their parents were staying at Willerby House for another night. Sarah was supposed to be at work too; she had intended to travel with the two men, but she was not ready to leave in time; after Marjorie called her, she went back to sleep. It was decided that she should go up by train during the morning; she telephoned her employers to say that she was unwell and would not be in that day. Marjorie, looking at her white face, thought that she only spoke what was the truth in fact.

Despite the manner of its start, the previous evening had been cheerful. Desperately, Robert had suggested a game of vingt-et-un after dinner, and this had been a surprising and noisy success. Ruth won four and ninepence, and allowed an impression of mystery to develop about the nature of her past friendship with Clive merely by refusing to divulge any details. Clive seemed embarrassed, and Sarah bored. Marjorie was quite bewildered, for she could not understand why Ruth had not said that she knew Clive. His name was not so unusual that he was likely to be another Clive Bretherton than the one she had met before. Unwillingly, she remembered something she had not thought of for weeks: Ruth's curious inspection of Willerby House on the day that they first encountered one another.

Sarah disappeared half an hour before she was due to leave for her train. This time she left Flash behind, and Marjorie, who was very busy, decided that if she missed that one she must simply be put on the next, but it was annoying; she had shopping to do, and as the weather was still good and she had the use of the car, she

had planned to take Mr and Mrs Bretherton for a drive as a way of passing part of the day.

However, Sarah came back in time. She said that she had been to see Ruth so that she could thank her for last night's rescue. This seemed an excess of courtesy from the girl, and she rose in the esteem of her future mother-in-law. She was sent off on the prearranged train, which Clive was intending to meet in London, waving from the window in her white fur hat and looking very fragile and young.

Marjorie and Mrs Bretherton each made a mental note not to discuss the forthcoming marriage; neither could believe that it would in fact happen after the events of the last few days, and both felt time must be allowed to take a hand in the development of what was to follow. Since nothing could be done by them, there was little more to be said; they must trust to the good sense of Clive at least, who might be expected to have some, to resolve the situation. The fact that Ruth had once known Clive had nothing to do with it, whatever their relationship might have been in the past.

After lunch, Ruth telephoned and asked Marjorie to come up to the cottage; she said there was something urgent to be discussed, and as she had to go up to town herself the next day it could not wait. Marjorie asked Mrs Bretherton to excuse her, and set off. The old lady was in fact happy to be alone; she was accustomed to a certain amount of solitude and enjoyed it. She wrapped herself up warmly and called both Rory and Flash to her side. There would be time for a really good walk before tea, and today there should be no complications.

Ruth had coffee waiting when Marjorie arrived. A log fire burned brightly, and the cottage was as spic and span as usual, but Ruth looked strained and as if she lacked sleep. She came straight to the point.

'Has Clive gone quite mad? He can't mean to marry that child, it'll never work out.'

'I know. I can't think how he ever got involved with her in the first place,' Marjorie agreed. 'They quarrelled during the weekend, as you must have realised. That was why she was walking about the countryside all on her own. I'm sure they'll break it off when they've a chance to discuss it away from all of us.'

‘Not judging by the way Sarah was talking this morning,’ said Ruth. ‘They plan to marry in a month or so’s time, she told me.’

‘But she won’t even talk to Clive,’ said Marjorie. ‘He’ll have to finish it, if she doesn’t.’

Ruth took a cigarette from a packet on the table. She lit it, and then said, deliberately, ‘Has it occurred to you that Sarah might be pregnant?’

The expression on Marjorie’s face supplied the answer to this.

‘I didn’t think of it until after she’d left this morning, or I’d have tackled her,’ Ruth said. ‘But that was why I asked you to come up.’

Marjorie knew that Ruth would indeed have asked Sarah, and spared no punches. She was very glad to think the chance had gone, but the theory began to make sense as she thought about it.

‘It could be the reason for the whole business,’ she said slowly. ‘It explains everything.’

‘I’ve been trying to understand why she bothered to come up here this morning,’ Ruth said. ‘She thanked me quite adequately yesterday, it wasn’t necessary to add to that. Sarah may be a well-brought-up girl, but this was carrying politeness to the limit. Since she left I’ve been wondering if she had wanted to unburden herself to me, and then couldn’t do it when it came to the point.’

‘But why you? Why should she?’ Marjorie protested. ‘You’re a stranger to her.’

‘That’s the reason. It’s often easier to tell your troubles to someone you’ve never met before than to your family or friends. Less inhibiting,’ said Ruth. ‘And she was a bit weepy and overwrought when I picked her up last night, though she soon recovered. At the time I simply thought she was frightened. But she may have felt we were more than mere acquaintances. Young people aren’t easy to understand.’

Marjorie reflected that she had refused to allow Clive, her dear friend and brother-in-law, to talk it all out the day before, yet here was Ruth apparently content to hear the worries of a girl only a little older than her own daughter.

‘Remember, her parents are abroad. She may be short of props and stays in her life,’ Ruth was saying.

This could be the clue: Ruth’s concern for Sarah could mirror

what she feared for her own daughter, for so long lost to her.

'If you're right, it explains why she went careering about on that pony yesterday,' said Marjorie, with reluctance. She began to tell Ruth the detailed events of the day before until the time of her return. It all hung together, but it was evidence of the most circumstantial nature.

'Well, let's hope the exercise will work,' said Ruth bluntly.

'But it's so awful.'

'Don't be sentimental.' Ruth sounded quite angry. 'Is it any more awful than bringing an unwanted child into the world, or starting a marriage that's bound to end in disaster, with the child's parents separated? For that's what will happen, and you know it. Sarah will never stick to Clive, though he's enough of a quixotic ass to stand by her, no doubt.'

'Supposing she went away into the country somewhere and nad it, and got it adopted.' Marjorie began to think aloud. 'We might adopt it—it would be Robert's niece or nephew, after all.'

'Well, it's an idea. You could suggest it,' said Marjorie.

'Ruth, no! We're still only guessing. You may not be right,' Marjorie said, trying to keep a sense of proportion. 'What gave you the idea?'

'I don't know. It was more of a hunch than anything. Don't forget, I've had two kids myself,' said Ruth. 'She was very pale, she wolfed down some coffee I produced and ate half a dozen biscuits; and the whole engagement is so fantastic that there must be some very good reason behind it.'

The more Marjorie allowed the possibility to develop in her mind, the more likely it seemed. Sarah had certainly not been at her best in the mornings; yet she had been very hungry during the day, and had displayed an astonishing capacity for physical effort, rushing about the house apart from her walks and her ride.

'Well, we can't interfere. It's their affair,' Marjorie said decisively, and with relief.

'Oh, but we must, and we can,' said Ruth at once.

'Ruth, we can't. It's not our business.'

But Marjorie thought of Clive and his sad, worried face with dismay.

‘We can. You’re to be her sister-in-law. You could tackle her. You’re a lot older, she likes you, that’s reason enough,’ said Ruth.

‘But if we’re wrong, it’s the most dreadful thing to accuse her of. Why, it’s slanderous,’ said Marjorie.

‘It should be possible to trap her into giving herself away, without accusing her,’ Ruth said. ‘You could play on her emotions a bit, lead her along—she’d crack.’

‘Ruth, I couldn’t possibly do it. And I wouldn’t if I could,’ said Marjorie.

‘Well, tackle Clive then, and see what he’s got to say, or get Robert to do it.’

‘Impossible.’ Marjorie froze at the whole idea. In her mind’s eye the structure of family confidence crumpled at the proposition.

‘Well, if you won’t interfere, I will,’ Ruth said at last. ‘Sarah must be offered the chance to talk things over with someone who’s older, and who isn’t Clive. There are times in life when one must take action, one can’t always sit on the sidelines avoiding all responsibility. Grow up, Marjorie. Not everyone lives in a cocoon, like you. I might have been saved from a disastrous marriage if a more experienced person had really tried to show me the light—might, I say, it’s not a certainty by any means. You little ignoramus, you haven’t any idea of what people can do to each other, have you?’ The words were not said unkindly, but Ruth as she spoke added in her mind, nor of what your precious Robert has done to me.

‘Breaking a marriage up is a wretched enough business even if there aren’t any children,’ she said. ‘But when there are, it tears your heart out.’

Marjorie did not resent the lecture. Humbly, she admit/ed that all this was quite outside her experience.

‘Clive’s such a dear,’ she said feebly.

‘Yes, he is, but it’s the dears in this life who often come unstuck,’ said Ruth. Was I a dear once, she wondered bitterly, and could not be sure. It seemed that this canker of unhappiness had been part of her for ever. ‘Sarah isn’t one. She’s not a bad little thing at heart, perhaps, but she’s very foolish.’

‘Perhaps Clive isn’t really such a dear after all. He did get her into this mess,’ said Marjorie, still trying to come to terms with the

situation.

‘She may have asked for all she’s got,’ said Ruth. ‘Oh, she deserves sympathy, maybe, and must be helped, but don’t be too harsh on poor old Clive.’

Reluctantly, Marjorie allowed her own knowledge of Clive’s unpredictable behaviour to rise to the surface of her mind. It seemed fantastic to cast him in the role of seducer, but was it?

‘Clive and Robert are alike in many ways,’ Ruth was saying now. ‘You must see that, Marjorie, surely? For one thing, they’re both very attractive men.’

Marjorie supposed that they were; it was not something she had ever attempted to analyse in such definite terms.

‘But however much of an ass Clive’s been—and at best he’s been damned careless,’ Ruth went on, ‘he doesn’t deserve this. Robert would never get himself into such a mess.’

It was true. Robert would be pitiless. Marjorie was startled by the accuracy of Ruth’s observation. How did she know that there was this fundamental difference between the brothers, that Robert was steel where Clive was vulnerable? It was something that she had never seen herself until now, when it was shown to her.

‘Ruth, how well did you know Clive?’ she asked curiously.

‘Oh, quite well, but not as well as all that,’ said Ruth. ‘We had no affair, if that’s what you’re wondering.’

Marjorie was, although she was embarrassed at hearing her doubt put so bluntly into words.

‘I first met him years ago, at a party,’ said Ruth.

‘You seem to understand him very well,’ said Marjorie. And Robert too, she added in her mind. She wanted to ask why Ruth had never confessed to knowing Clive. She wanted to ask why Ruth had returned early from Godaiming. But she did not do it.

It was only when she was walking home that she understood her reason: she was afraid of the reply.

14

There were snowdrops in the grass at Willerby House. Ruth saw them when she walked up the drive on the day of Marjorie and Robert's return from Switzerland. She had arranged with Mrs Birdupp that she would go down that day with some flowers to welcome them home, so now she carried a large azalea in a pot and a big bunch of chrysanthemums. She had timed her arrival so that Mrs Birdupp would be on the point of leaving; it was easy to assure her that she would lock up by closing the front door on the yale when she had finished putting the flowers in water. Mrs Birdupp enjoyed the harmony between both her employers; it meant that neither made trouble for the other. She helped Ruth to find vases and pots, and then departed.

Ruth was alone in Robert's house.

It did not take long to arrange the flowers. The azalea looked splendid on the hall table, and for as long as it lasted would be a reminder that it was she who had given it. The chrysanthemums, displayed in a pottery bowl, she placed in a corner of the sitting-room in a different position from where Marjorie usually put flowers. They looked very well there, and would catch the light when the lamps were lit so that their copper tones would be reflected brightly into the room. When she had finished, Ruth walked slowly round the house. She felt an intruder, alien, in the upper rooms, and returned to the more familiar ground floor. She had never before entered Robert's study: for a long time she sat there, in a chair by his desk.

What was the use of going on with this nameless effort? She seemed to have got herself cast in the role of family friend now, and

this was not what she had intended at all. Robert showed no sign of boredom with Marjorie, nor the slightest desire to resume with Ruth their old relationship. Sometimes, when they were together in a room, it was all that she could do to prevent herself from putting out a hand to touch him; it was incredible to her that Robert should not feel this too, but he did not seem to retain even a sense of familiarity. As long as she lived, no one else would have the power over her that he held, and she knew it; it was hard indeed to accept that he did not feel the same.

She was enmeshed now in their lives. When she had heard of their plans to go to Switzerland she had at first thought of taking unpaid leave and going too, to turn up crying 'Surprise, surprise,' at their hotel, and be thereafter a limpet at their side, but she abandoned the idea when $he discovered how adept a skier Marjorie was; she herself was only an average performer and so would be outclassed; and her only tactic so far had been to show up, by her achievements, Marjorie's defects. Her own cottage had a chic that Marjorie's house, comfortable and pleasant though it was, lacked, and this owed nothing to money. In the same way her appearance had an elegance that Marjorie would never attain. On the few occasions when she had entertained Robert and Marjorie at Rose Cottage, the food and wine she gave them were chosen with a sophistication which Marjorie, alone, would never manage. Robert would have been aware of this; it must take effect in some way. She was no longer sure of what, in fact, she hoped for; originally she had meant, by sheer proximity, to become necessary to him again, as she had once believed herself to be, to the exclusion of Marjorie. Now, she thought that perhaps she could bear to share him; it seemed that she could live without him, for she had done so for many, many months, but in the dark hours of the night, when she felt most alone, the loss of him was nearly unendurable. What would happen to them all? Would she ever claim him back? She ran her fingers over his desk, where his own hands must often rest. Did he really love Marjorie, and if so, why? There was nothing that she was certain of at all, except her own misery.

Before she left for Switzerland, Marjorie, her face transformed with joy, had revealed that she was pregnant. She wondered if she ought to ski now, and Ruth had urged her to carry on and enjoy herself while she could. Pacing up and down in her cottage while they were away, Ruth knew that the baby would make it far more

difficult for her to come between them. Perhaps she should pack it in, give up, leave Haverbury, emigrate, go to Canada and insist on seeing her children. She had thought of writing anonymous letters to upset Marjorie; she had thought of flinging herself at Robert in an attempt at seduction; she had even, one wild night after Sarah's escapade, thought of luring Marjorie to the quarry and pushing her over the edge. After reaching this nadir, she had trembled for her own sanity. This was not how she wanted Robert back, by compulsion: she wanted him only because he wanted her himself. Meanwhile, if she were to stay on at Rose Cottage, for lack of a definite policy, her only prospect was to be a jolly good sort, ever around: but there was no harm in emphasising, when she could, the various ways in which she would make a better business hostess than Marjorie.

She must go home: she could not spend all day moping here at Willerby House. She went out of Robert's study and shut the door; then she found a scrap of paper by the telephone and wrote a message:

Welcome home. Supper waiting at Rose Cottage. Come just as you are. R.

This she left propped up among their letters where they would see it immediately, and departed.

They arrived at eight o'clock after a tiring trip. Their plane had been delayed by fog, and they were two hours late landing. They collected Rory from Mrs Birdupp who had looked after him in their absence; bathed and changed, but appeared none the less clothed as if for *apri-ski,* and full of the story of their adventures away and on the journey back. As the time when she might expect them to come grew steadily nearer, Ruth had found herself in a fever of anticipation at the thought of seeing Robert. She imagined that every sound she heard was his car, and when at last he was really there, her nerves were taut. It was ridiculous to be in this state, and she despised herself for her weakness. It would be better to hate him; perhaps she did, in fact, a little.

He glowed with health and sunburn, and so did Marjorie, although she was tired after travelling. In spite of being spared, by their flight, a long train trip across France and an uncomfortable passage across the Channel, they had had to make several changes on the Swiss trains and taken a long time to reach Zurich.

‘Now I must settle down and become placid and cowlike,’ Marjorie said, chuckling at the thought. She seemed quite altered by happiness, and far more confident. Robert, too, wore a new, if rather sheepish, look of pride, as he looked at his wife, which he seemed to do nearly all the time, Ruth noticed.

‘He thinks I’ll break,’ Marjorie said. ‘Tell him it’s all quite normal, Ruth. Perhaps he’ll believe you.’

‘Wait till you’re having numbers three and four,’ said Ruth. ‘You’ll soon be bored by the whole business.’ She tried to make her voice light, but in her own ears it merely sounded unnatural.

‘Now, tell us about Sarah. What’s been happening? We haven’t heard a word since we left. Clive hasn’t written.’ Marjorie thought it was time she had less attention. Ruth, poor dear, had had no holiday and looked tired; while they had been happily gadding about in the Alps, she had been toiling to produce television programmes for their later delight, and figuratively holding the hands of their relations meanwhile. Even so, she had found time to invite them to supper and provide a splendid meal which was not the least bit spoiled because they were late, and she had been to Willerby House to arrange flowers for their return. Marjorie had seen at once that the copper chrysanthemums showed to far more advantage where Ruth had placed them, on the comer shelf, than in the position near the window where she usually put flowers. The chagrin she felt was unworthy and she stifled it; Ruth was a good friend, who thought of everything, even of how dreary a meal from tins on this first night back would be.

During their holiday, Robert and Marjorie had banned all talk about Clive and Sarah, although they could not ban their own thoughts and each had reflected often on the situation. Now its importance must once again be acknowledged.

‘Well, I saw Sarah. Our fears were justified, and it’s true,’ Ruth said. ‘She was thankful to have it all out, not a secret, poor child. But she said Clive didn’t know.’

‘Didn’t know?’ Robert was astonished. ‘Well, why on earth—?’

‘Why on earth did they get engaged, you mean?’ Ruth asked. She looked at Robert and her hand was not quite steady when she picked up her wineglass to drink some of the rosé which Robert had brought as a contribution to the meal.

‘Exactly,’ Robert said grimly.

‘I didn’t discover. I assume that Clive got carried away. He must have, after all; let’s face it. She’s such a child herself, maybe she made him feel young again.’

Just as Marjorie somehow renews your youth: for this was it, suddenly Ruth knew. Something fresh and unspoiled in Marjorie, although she was not very young, made Robert shed his middle-aged cynicism. Here was the answer: despoil Marjorie in some way, and she would be vanquished.

‘So we’re no further on?’ Robert asked.

‘No. But I’m seeing her on Monday evening. She’ll have told Clive by then. I suggested various alternatives to her. She seemed rather cowed and just listened without saying much.’

‘I hope she won’t do anything stupid. We’d all come to the rescue,’ said Robert, very British. ‘Moneywise.’

‘I know. I took it upon myself to say so,’ said Ruth. ‘But we’ll have to see what happens.’

‘I suppose they could be happy. She’ll grow up after the baby’s born,’ said Marjorie.

‘Ducky, your condition is blinding you to reality,’ said Ruth. ‘We aren’t all dewy-eyed, like you, when pregnant. Sarah won’t grow up for ages, if ever. Oh, some girls might, I grant you, under the circumstances, and be determined to make a go of it with Clive. But not an addlepate like Sarah.’

‘It should be you, marrying Clive,’ said Marjorie, suddenly struck by this brilliant notion. ‘There, Robert, now what do you say to that?’ But although it sounded like the answer to an equation, it was an unsatisfying solution for some reason. ‘After all, you said you’d known him for years.’

‘And you think I’d overlook his peccadilloes?’ Ruth said. ‘Maybe I would, if it was worth it. But Clive isn’t the man for me.’ She looked at Robert across the table, and her face assumed an expression of recklessness. ‘Now, if it was you, Robert, who was available, I might think differently.’ She was laughing as she spoke, but there was no humour in her eyes. Robert watched her, tensely, crumbling a piece of bread in his fingers, not speaking.

Marjorie had begun to giggle at Ruth’s words, but now, as she looked from her husband to her friend, her laughter ceased. She did

not know what had happened to frighten her; perhaps it was her pregnancy, making her over-imaginative; but it seemed suddenly as if she could almost see an intangible cord linking Robert and Ruth across the table, and totally excluding her.

15

Ruth spent Monday night in London after her interview with Sarah, so that Robert and Marjorie could not at once learn its outcome. They dined that evening with the Newtons. Robert longed to ask Philip's legal advice as to whether a marriage contracted to legitimise the birth of a child could be speedily dissolved, but he refrained. He did not want Philip's sharp mind to catch the possible closeness of the predicament. In his view Clive had been a crass idiot, and he intended to tell him so as soon as the matter was in the open. Meanwhile everything seemed to depend on Ruth, and though he trusted her, he wished that she were not so closely involved. Open scandal appalled him. A tangle of this sort was most unpleasant and might have an adverse effect on Clive's career. High-ranking public servants were expected to live like Caesar's wife; if they could not, they should at least show discretion in the conduct of their private affairs. At all costs, outward propriety must be observed.

While he and Philip drank port and discussed the state of stocks and shares, Joan showed Marjorie various articles of baby equipment which she might borrow.

They inspected a cot and a high chair, discussed prams, and laid plans for the conduct of the event that was still far in the future. Marjorie, these days, could think of little else, and Joan listened sympathetically to a recital of her hopes and apprehensions.

Driving home, Robert said, 'I do wish Ruth was coming back tonight. I wonder what was decided.'

He rarely uttered his fears aloud; now he explained how Clive

might suffer at the Ministry.

'He's very silent in all this,' Marjorie said. 'I thought that after Christmas he might say something.'

'He is silent, you're right, and well he may be,' said Robert. 'He hasn't exactly covered himself with glory.'

'I can't understand what attracted him to Sarah in the first place,' said Marjorie. 'That's what baffles me. I wouldn't have thought she was his type at all.'

'She's a sexy little bit,' said Robert coarsely. 'There's your answer. It's usually the explanation of this sort of mystery.'

'I suppose so.' Marjorie found it hard to imagine a purely physical liaison; to her sex without affection was incomprehensible.

'We'll hear tomorrow. Ruth will ring up or pop down when she gets back,' she said.

But the next day Robert telephoned to say that he had unexpectedly been summoned to Manchester for the night/ Bill Smythson was due to attend a meeting there; he had gone down with 'flu, and Robert was deputed to take his place. It was a boost to Robert to be chosen over the heads of his colleagues; there was triumph in his voice as he explained what had happened.

'Will you be all right on your own, darling?'

'Of course,' said Marjorie stoutly, but her spirits sank. Before her marriage she had always been alone in the cottage; then, after the noisy, tiring day at school she had welcomed her solitude. But Robert was seldom away from Willerby House; and she had usually exhausted the resources of her own company by the time he returned. However, she must put up with it and not make a fuss.

'Hurry back,' she said.

There seemed no point in cooking an elaborate meal since there would be no one to share it. The butcher had left steaks, for she had planned to try out her new electric grill. They would keep till tomorrow. Then she remembered Ruth. Why not ask her down, and hear what had happened about Sarah? There was an idea, and instead of a boring old boiled egg, they would eat the steaks. Ruth would need a proper meal after her day's work. They might as well open a bottle of that Beaujolais Robert had just bought, too, while they were about it.

She pushed a note through Ruth's door on her way out with Rory after lunch. It was very cold, and overcast. The ground was hard, for it had frozen in the night. She walked up the track that led to the quarry, and her thoughts turned to that other walk on Boxing Day. If it had not all been so tense and frightful, with such undercurrents of emotion, it would have been extremely comic: there they all were, setting off together, and returning by different routes. To an observer it would have seemed funny. At least she and Robert had neither quarrelled nor parted. She thought about him contentedly. Their holiday had been perfect; his skiing had improved enough to let him go with her on various runs. She had hidden her impatience while she waited for him to stem slowly round bends or pick himself up out of the snow; in any case, she had moved with care herself, to avoid falling about. In another year or two he would be able to go wherever she could; his masculine sheer strength of muscle was a compensation for lack of skill. They had been happy together, and because of the child he had shown her a new tenderness.

She was very well, and had so far suffered no sickness or trouble. She was lucky indeed, but under the surface of her thoughts something nagged at her worryingly, some small memory which she could not pinpoint. Her mind latched on to the problem of Sarah and Clive; was it connected? Ruth had such definite views about them; there was no shilly-shallying with her, she knew just what she thought should be done, and at once she set about doing it. Ruth by name, and ruthless by nature, in fact, she was; and would obviously go wholeheartedly in pursuit of her goal, whatever it might be. Marjorie remembered that she still knew no details of Clive's acquaintance with Ruth. He had not referred to it, and it had not been mentioned until dinner at Rose Cottage the other evening. It suddenly struck Marjorie as odd that Robery had not spoken about it, for he must have been curious. She knew, by this time, that it was a myth to say that women were the true gossips, for most of the titbits they passed on were learned first from their husbands.

Robert was no different from other men; he must have wanted to know about it.

But perhaps he did. Perhaps he already knew whatever there was to learn. Her mind busy with this idea, she reached the quarry. Rory

had run ahead and gone down the track that led into its depths. She followed him without thinking, along the sloping path. It was dank and cold. Spindly trees grew from the sides of the pit, and took away much of the light so that it was in perpetual gloom. She walked on, feeling suddenly cold and rather weary, which was ridiculous. To discount it, she walked faster, reached the bottom, and began to climb a winding path that should bring her out near the spot where Sarah had emerged that other afternoon. The going was rather slippery, with loose earth crumbling away as she walked, and she began to move with more caution, afraid of losing her balance. It was steep, and once or twice she lost her footing, but she was able each time to catch at a bush or branch and stop herself falling. She reached the top safely. Rory was waiting for her; he wagged his tail and snuffled when she stepped out into the field. While she was down in the quarry the sky had turned yellow, and as she walked on, it began to snow. She pulled her coat collar up round her ears and walked on briskly. This was not like Swiss snow, and the sooner she reached home the better. She hurried back by the side of the quarry and retraced her steps along the track. Rory lolloped ahead, and as the snow fell more heavily he became almost invisible, hidden by the thick, white mass. It went down Marjorie's neck and into her eyes, and as she walked the wind began to rise. By the time she reached home it was blowing hard and the snow was eddying round in showers. Thankfully, she entered the warm house and shut out the bitter day.

'Well, boy, we look a pair of wrecks, don't we?' she said to Rory. His coat was crusted with snow. She fetched a towel and rubbed him dry. Then she put on the kettle and made herself some tea, which she drank seated by the fire in the sitting-room. Outside, the wind blew hard and the snow fell heavily. Poor Robert. Would it be worse in Manchester? He had travelled by train and must be there by now; he would be staying in a comfortable hotel so that she need not worry about his welfare. Ruth, though, would have an unpleasant drive from the station if this went on.

Partly to pass the time, and partly because she felt cold, Marjorie went upstairs and had a bath. The water was very hot; she lay and baked, her mind a blank except for occasional speculations about the baby. It was weird and miraculous to think that it lay in her womb now, though showing no sign of its presence. The only difference she felt was that her breasts were heavy, and laced with

blue veins. Was Sarah like this? By now she must be getting thick around the waist. They would never pass that baby off as premature. Poor Sarah, poor little girl. Marjorie resolved to help her if she could. Surely the miracle in her body, commonplace though it was, would transform her? Marjorie could not believe that she did not love Clive; why else was she in her present plight? To Marjorie it seemed so simple.

She got out of the water at last, dried, and dressed in slacks and a thick sweater. Then she went down to the kitchen. First, she fed Rory, and after that she began to get the dinner ready for herself and Ruth. She drew the cork from the wine and put the bottle by the stove to warm. Then she laid the trolley; they would eat by the fire. She plugged in the liquidiser, opened a tin of fruit and one of cream, and in a few seconds had made a pudding. Finally, she washed and peeled some mushrooms, slit some tomatoes, and laid the steaks ready to cook. Just as she finished, the front door bell rang.

Marjorie wiped her hands on a towel, took off her apron, and hurried to let Ruth in, out of the snow. In her haste she did not see that Rory had dropped a precious morsel of his dinner on the floor. Her foot came down on the fragment, slipped, and she fell heavily. For a moment she lay on the floor with her heart pounding and her hands to her stomach. She was unhurt, but jolted. Nothing happened. She felt no aches. In the ordinary way, she would have paid no attention. She got up, wiped the mark off the floor, pulled down her jersey and went to let Ruth in.

A flurry of snow blew into the hall as the door opened. Ruth took off her boots as soon as she got inside. Her coat was covered with snow, and so was the scarf tied over her hair.

'I thought you'd got lost,' she said.

'Sorry, I'd got something boiling,' said Marjorie. Some perverse quirk stopped her from telling Ruth that she had fallen. 'Let me take your coat.'

She hung it up near the radiator, where it would dry, and then followed Ruth who was already on her way to the fire.

'What a night.' Ruth held out her hands to the blaze. 'At this rate we'll be snowed in by morning. What have you done with Robert?'

'He's gone to Manchester, poor darling,' said Marjorie. 'It's

probably worse there.'

'Does it snow in Manchester? Well, anyway, he'll be all right, lapped in luxury in some cushy joint, eating too much with his cronies,' said Ruth. 'How are you? How's junior?'

Ruth hated to think of the child; but she hoped by mentioning it often enough to grow used to the idea of it.

'Oh, fine,' said Marjorie.

'You look a bit pale, under your sunburn,' said Ruth, looking at her sharply. 'What have you been up to?'

'Nothing much. I went for a walk and got a bit cold, I think,' said Marjorie. 'I've had a bath. Let's have a drink.' She walked over to the table where bottles and glasses were arranged. 'You must have had an awful drive from the station, didn't you? What was it like?'

'Ghastly. Visibility nearly nil,' said Ruth. 'It was like being in thick fog, the headlights were reflected back from the snow like a blanket. I'll have a brandy, please. You'd better too, it will warm you up. Here, sit down and I'l| get them.'

'No, I'm all right, really,' Marjorie insisted. A tiny ache had started in the small of her back. She pretended not to notice it; if she ignored it, it would go away. She busied herself with the glasses, mixing them each stiff brandies and adding ginger ale. They sat, then, on either side of the fire, drinking them. Ruth smoked, and Marjorie's ache disappeared, so that she thought she had imagined it.

Ruth began to talk about a conference she had been to during the afternoon to discuss a programme about the antique trade. Marjorie was more anxious about the problem of Sarah, but there was plenty of time to hear about that, so she listened instead to Ruth's tale. Ruth was interesting when she talked about her work, and Marjorie always enjoyed the stories she told.

After a time, the telephone rang. It was Robert, ringing to ask if Marjorie was all right on her own, and had they much snow? There was none in Manchester.

Ruth sat, outwardly impassive, while they talked for ten minutes. Marjorie's face was so expressive that she could judge Robert's remarks by what it revealed. At last the interminable duologue ended.

'I'll get dinner now. You stay there and relax,' Marjorie said. She

picked up a magazine and gave it to Ruth. It was full of wise articles on running the home, and sound counsel for young mothers. Ruth laid it aside as soon as Marjorie had gone. It was worthy but dull. *Vogue or Harpers* were more in her line. She got up and poured herself another brandy, then sat down again, staring at the fire and thinking about Robert. Daydreaming was infantile; it was useless trying to pretend that he was there. He was probably in the hotel bar, thinking of neither Marjorie nor her, by now. She wished she liked Marjorie less: worthy and dull, she nevertheless grew on one; she was good, virtuous and wholesome, like her choice in magazines. In an odd way, Ruth valued her friendship; she would have been lonely in Haverbury without it. She knew that she would always be welcomed by Marjorie at Willerby House.

Robert would never be spurred on to fresh ventures by Marjorie, but he was sure of her, and she would never drag him back. She was not exciting; her power lay in this very fact. By the time she had raised a family, acquired grey hair and doubtless lost her figure, her hold on Robert would be indestructible, woven securely by a thousand shared experiences. Even if he dallied here and there from occasional boredom or opportunity, nothing would seriously imperil that loyalty. What was she doing here, tormenting herself with useless longings? She ought to quit.

Presently Marjorie came in, wheeling the trolley and accompanied by a delicious smell.

'Marjorie, that does look good. How lovely,' said Ruth.

'I'm afraid the wine's pretty well mulled, I had it beside the Aga and it's got quite hot,' said Marjorie.

'Never mind, it's just the thing for a night like this. We'll sleep like logs,' said Ruth. She wished she might; sleep eluded her these nights. 'Is it still snowing?'

'It must be, the wind's howling round at the back,' said Marjorie. She sat down, and they spread napkins on their knees, put their plates on top, and began to eat. The steak was tender. Marjorie described her grill and the joy it was to be to her. They drank their wine, refilled their glasses, and drank some more. Both felt very idle. After a time Marjorie's back began to ache again. She shifted a cushion so that it was supported, and drank some more wine. She had to make a considerable effort to rouse herself when it was time to take out the trolley and fetch the coffee.

Ruth looked as if she were almost asleep when she returned. She blinked lazily and smiled as Marjorie put down the tray on a table near them both.

'Now, tell me about Sarah,' Marjorie said at last, when they were both settled. 'What's going to happen?'

'There's not much to tell. She told Clive about the infant and it seems he's more determined than ever to go through with the wedding,' said Ruth. 'Says they must, and that they will make a go of it. Sarah's parents can't get home, and they've fixed it for Saturday week. Clive was going to get in touch with Robert to ask you both to come.'

'Oh, heavens,' said Marjorie. 'Well, they may make a success of it. I don't see why we should all be so sure they won't.'

'I hope you're right. All marriages are a fearful tossup, and so much is luck, but they aren't starting very well.'

'Ruth, how was it that you knew Clive before?' Marjorie asked. Full of brandy and wine, the barriers were down.

Ruth smiled.

'Don't you know?'

'No, how could I? Clive hasn't mentioned it,' said Marjorie.

'You'd better ask Robert,' said Ruth.

'Does he know?' Here it was, the knowledge that she feared.

'Oh yes. Robert knows all about it,' said Ruth. 'He's always known.'

16

Marjorie could not sleep. Her backache had grown worse and now there was a slight pain in her stomach. She put on her light and looked at the time. It was half-past one. She put the light out again, pulled the bedclothes up around her, and tried to relax, but her mind would not stop racing. Round in circles went her thoughts: Robert had known for years about Clive's friendship with Ruth, yet he had given no sign of knowing Ruth when she first came into their lives. But there was that odd misunderstanding they had had on the first day: she remembered now that he had clamoured to be told Ruth's name. What had made him suspect that she might be Clive's friend? And if he had suspected, why had he not mentioned it? Ruth had made no claim either; but she had watched the house. On went her thoughts, relentlessly, and on went the niggling pain.

At two-thirty the pain was a definite fact and Marjorie realised that she was threatened with the loss of her baby. She lay very still. She ought to telephone the doctor. There were drugs that you could have. She knew, though, that it was essential to lie motionless. The hard-worked doctor would not be very pleased at being summoned out to her if the morning would be soon enough; and he might have trouble getting through the snow. But she must call him.

She could not remember the number. To find it, she would have to get out of bed and go downstairs, and this might be more harmful than not calling him at all. If she waited until daybreak, she could ring up Ruth and get her to call the doctor. As the minutes ticked past she began to think that Ruth might forgive her if she woke her now. A further five minutes convinced her that Ruth would expect to be rung in such an emergency. She dialled her

number. There was no longer any room in her mind for thoughts of what was past.

Ruth's voice answered very quickly, sounding close and startled.

'Ruth, I'm sorry to wake you. It's Marjorie.'

'Yes. What's wrong? Is it Robert?'

'No, it's not Robert, it's me. I think I'm having a miscarriage. Could you ring up Dr Knowles? I haven't got his number up here and I don't think I ought to get out of bed. Or could you tell me his number so that I can ring him?'

'Oh, lord. Hang on.' Ruth tried to wake herself up more efficiently. 'Dr Knowles, yes, I'll ring him. I'll come down to you, Marjorie. Can I get in?'

'Oh Ruth, would you?' As usual, Ruth had cut through, straight to the essentials.

'Of course, you can't be alone. Now, can I get in or are you all locked up?'

'We are locked up, but there's a key for the front door on a beam inside the garage,' Marjorie said. She had locked herself out once, during the summer, and ever since then had kept a spare key outside. Now she had cause to be thankful.

'No bolts? No chains?'

'I didn't bolt the door.' She had been too tired to bother after Ruth had gone.

'Well, hang on and don't worry. I'll be there as quickly as I can,' said Ruth, and hung up.

Marjorie put down the telephone and lay back. She left the light on, and watched the clock. Ruth would be some time, perhaps as much as half an hour. She must ring the doctor, then she must dress and scramble down here through the snow, and finally hunt for the key.

Ruth took a moment to finish collecting her scattered wits; she had been deeply asleep, for a wonder, when the telephone rang, and the unexpected sound of Marjorie's voice had made her certain that something had happened to Robert. Now she needed a second or two to adjust her mind to what had in fact occurred. There was no choice about her action. She got up, put on her dressing-gown, and found the telephone directory. This was just the sort of

moment, and just the sort of weather, when telephones went wrong; it would be no fun if she had to go through the snow to fetch the doctor herself. But she was spared this: Mrs Knowles answered at once, with the news that the doctor was already out at a baby case. She would try to get in touch with him, and she would try to get his partner to come if he could not. Meanwhile, Marjorie must lie still, stirring neither hand nor foot.

Ruth put on her slacks and sweater, snatched up her coat, found boots and a torch, and set off down the road. The snow was still falling, but the wind had dropped; there were drifts across the lane and she knew that conditions would be worse at the top of the hill. The doctor would have a lot of trouble getting through; even if he came, he might not be able to do anything. Meanwhile, poor Marjorie was alone, and in a panic; that had been clear from her voice. Ruth walked as fast as she could. She found the key easily; so might a burglar. How odd of Robert to allow so obvious a hiding-place. Rory's bark came, deep and gruff, as she let herself into the house. He must be in the kitchen. She called to him, hoping he would recognise her voice. All the time in her mind was the knowledge that if Marjorie lost this child she would also lose her main, if new, source of joy and the thing that could bind Robert to her for ever. Ruth knew that because she wished so much for this to happen, she must do everything she could to prevent it.

Marjorie appeared calm; she was pale, but said her pain had gone. It had never been much. Perhaps it was all a false alarm.

'I expect it is,' said Ruth. 'Lots of people have them.' Marjorie admitted that she had fallen earlier that evening.

'Oh, you ass. You should have told me. You ought to have gone to bed at once,' said Ruth. 'Still, it's no use worrying about that now. I'll go and fill you a hot water bottle. You lie still.'

'I am a bit chilly,' Marjorie confessed.

'I'll make you something to drink, that can't hurt you. What about Ovaltine or something?'

'Just hot milk, please,' said Marjorie in a meek voice.

'Ugh, do you like it? How could you,' Ruth shuddered. 'All right, hot milk it is.' She went off to the spare room and returned with a blanket, which she spread over Marjorie. Then she went down to the kitchen. Rory barked once when she entered, but wagged his

tail and snuffled at her very happily.

'You'd be a great scarer of burglars,' Ruth told him. 'Now, out of my way. Lie down.' She found milk and a pan, and put on the kettle for Marjorie's bottle. 'Here's a pickle,' she thought, and had to laugh at the thought that she was being forced to behave like Agnes in *David Copperfield*.

She would not let Marjorie sit up to drink the milk, but put an arm round her shoulders and supported her.

'Ruth, I'm so sorry. Fancy dragging you here like this.' Marjorie was near to tears.

'Brace up, old dear. You didn't drag me, I volunteered,' said Ruth. 'If you get upset, you won't help the situation, so calm down. I'll call you out to succour me next time I'm bilious.'

Marjorie laughed feebly. The milk warmed her, and she lay quietly. Ruth sat in a chair near her, smoking and drinking the strong Nescafé she had made for herself.

'How long do you think the doctor will be?'

There was no point in saying that he might not come at all.

'Not long. He may have a bit of a job getting through the snow, but he'll make it. Doctors always do, by some means or other,' said Ruth.

'Did you ever have a miscarriage?'

'No. I'm as tough as a horse. Never a sign,' said Ruth.

'Just think what Sarah would give if she could swop with me now,' said Marjorie.

'Yes, how true, but life is unjust,' said Ruth. 'Anyway, you'll probably be perfectly all right. You may have to stay in bed for a week or two, and then you'll be fine. This often happens.'

'I haven't got a pain now.'

'Well, there you are. It's decided to hang on,' said Ruth. She got up and went to the window, where she drew the curtain to one side and looked out. The snow had stopped falling and the stars were out. The night was clear and shining.

'It isn't snowing now,' said Ruth. 'The doctor won't be long.' She sat down, lit a new cigarette, and began to talk. For over an hour she talked about her travels, not letting Marjorie utter more than a word or two. She managed to find things to say that Marjorie had

never heard before; she talked about places she had seen and people she had met.

But at last it ended. Marjorie drew her knees up suddenly and cried, ‘Oh, Ruth, it’s going.’

When finally the doctor arrived Marjorie was lying quiet and still. The bed was freshly made with clean sheets; she was washed, and wearing a fresh nightdress. He did not need to stay long, for there were no complications. He patted Marjorie, left a sedative for her to take, and told her that she would soon be able to start another child.

Ruth saw him out of the house and then came back upstairs.

‘How do you feel.’

‘All right. Just miserable,’ Marjorie said. That clot of blood had been her baby, too small to identify, too young to show its sex. Now it was being carried away efficiently by the drainage system.

‘You’ll have another. Maybe it would have been delicate. These things are often for the best,’ said Ruth. ‘Come on, now. You must get some sleep.’

‘If I hadn’t gone skiing, it mightn’t have happened,’ said Marjorie. ‘I would ski, in spite of it.’

‘It would have happened in Switzerland, if that had been the trouble,’ said Ruth firmly. ‘I expect you got a bit overtired out in the snow this afternoon, and then you fell. Maybe you landed at an awkward angle. Now, come on, you mustn’t brood.’ She made Marjorie swallow the pill the doctor had left for her.

‘Now, I’m going to tuck you up,’ said Ruth. ‘You’re to go to sleep. I’ll go and lie down next door. I’ll stay till it’s time to get ready for work, and then I’ll fetch Mrs Birdupp. You’ll be fine in a day or two. You don’t want to ring up Robert, do you?’

Marjorie did, more than anything. But at Ruth’s question she decided not to do it. Obediently she lay down, without arguing. She was asleep when Ruth left the house early in the morning.

The sky was getting lighter. Ruth walked quickly through the clean, fresh snow. There were no clouds; later the sun would shine. Everywhere sparkled under the covering of snow. It would be a glorious, invigorating day.

17

A light was burning above the front door of Rose Cottage, as though Ruth expected a visitor. Robert slowed the car, and drew up beside the grass verge. He got out and walked up the path. For almost two weeks now, ever since it had happened, he had planned to call and thank Ruth for what she had done to help Marjorie. He had kept putting it off, assuring himself that it was more important to hurry home, but now, on the eve of Clive's wedding, it could be postponed no longer. Or so he reasoned. Accordingly, he had telephoned Marjorie from the office to tell her what he meant to do, so that she would not worry if he were home a few minutes late.

Thus he sought to salve his conscience on all counts. Why, then, had he travelled down on an earlier train than usual, taking pains to evade Philip, who was on it too? Ruth, he knew, from what Marjorie told him, was at home for a few days, working on a script.

Why had he a presentiment that the moment was of extreme significance as he pressed the bell?

Ruth came to the door. She wore a dark red velvet skirt and a black sweater. His impression that she expected a guest was intensified.

'Robert! How nice! Come in.'

She appeared calm: no outward sign showed of the tumult she felt. Every evening she had expected him to come; she knew that he must.

'How's Marjorie?'

'All right, I think. Still very low,' he said. He thought with gloom of the atmosphere at home. Physically, Marjorie had recovered

quickly, but she was engulfed in depression.

'It's natural. She'll soon buck up. It was rotten luck.'

This was an understatement. All the stuffing seemed to have been knocked out of her; she hardly spoke, in spite of every effort Robert made to rouse her.

'She just sits, brooding,' he said. 'I can't get her to show any interest in a thing.'

'Poor Marjorie,' said Ruth. And how glum for you, she thought.

'I really came to thank you for what you did that night,' he said. 'I ought to have come before.' He felt sheepish; the situation seemed to border on the farcical.

'That's all right,' said Ruth. 'Stay a minute, won't you? Give me your coat. You're early, Marjorie won't be expecting you yet, will she? Sit down and I'll get you a drink.'

Meekly, he did as he was told. Ruth's manner was brisk, like that of an efficient nurse, as she hung up his coat and mixed him a stiff whisky and water. Then she offered him a cigarette. Marjorie did not smoke, and when he married, Robert gave it up, for here was a good opportunity to make the effort. Now, with a small grimace, he accepted a cigarette; he felt that it was a symbolic act, as though he were returning into familiar ways for long deserted.

He owned an efficient lighter, maintained chiefly for social use, and he lit Ruth's cigarette and then his own. She seated herself facing him, and they both inhaled, looking at one another, not speaking. Then Ruth smiled, and Robert relaxed in his chair. For some time they sat, finding no need of speech, each recognising the easiness that can exist between those who have known each other a long time and shared some of their experience. At last Robert spoke; someone must shatter this nostalgic, comfortable cocoon.

'Thank goodness Marjorie rang you, that night. I can't think what would have happened if you hadn't come round.'

'Oh, she'd have found someone else,' said Ruth. She felt a sudden odd, feminine sympathy with Marjorie, a reluctance to talk about the details of that night even with Robert, yet she knew that he wanted to discuss it, perhaps even to seek her aid.

'She keeps crying,' he said awkwardly. 'She thinks I don't know.'

'Poor Marjorie. It's not an experience I've ever had, but I believe

it can be devastating,' Ruth said. 'It can make you feel utterly bereft. She'll get over it, she'll have another.'

'That's what the doctor says,' said Robert. 'But she doesn't seem able to shake it off.'

'Well, it's only just happened,' Ruth pointed out. 'Give her time.'

Robert would not put into words his own bitter disappointment; he felt it to be unworthy. He had told Marjorie more than once that it was she who mattered, and he meant it, but he was astonished at how bitterly he felt the blow himself. Sometimes, listening to Marjorie weeping quietly in the night, he wondered if there were more to her distress than this, some other cause for so much woe; it was a commonplace enough misfortune, and she had never before lacked a sense of proportion.

'I suppose you can't take her away for a few days?'

'No, not so soon after having a holiday,' Robert said. 'She'll just have to rise above it.'

They were the first unsympathetic words he had ever uttered about Marjorie. His sensation of disloyalty was only fleeting, succeeded by a feeling that this had all happened before as he looked at Ruth. The sight of her, in the familiar chair that had been in her London flat, one arm stretched out, her cigarette in her hand, had once been enough to stir him. In fact, he recognised, she had never lost her power; it was his response that had been suppressed.

'Are you expecting visitors tonight?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'No one else. I thought that you might come.' She watched him, smiling a little. Here was her moment and her triumph, delivered to her without another action on her part. She did not move. She had only to wait.

When, at last, Robert reached home, Marjorie was talking on the telephone. He heard her saying goodbye to someone, and that she would see them tomorrow.

'Hullo, darling, who was that?' he asked her, and kissed her gently. It was easy to speak lightly; he no longer felt the weary impatience, tinged with concern though it was, that he had experienced in the past week at the sight of her limp pallor.

'It was Clive. Sarah's called off the wedding,' Marjorie said. She

looked roused; there was colour in her face. Robert stared at her for a moment; he had run through so many emotions in the last hours, and was so concerned with the need to dissemble, that it required some effort to think of other things. But, in fact, there was no necessity to say anything yet, for Marjorie was still busily imparting information.

'The baby isn't Clive's. When Sarah heard we'd lost ours, she told him. Just in time.'

'Good God!' Now Robert was shaken out of his self absorption. 'Was she really going to fasten that on to Clive? Didn't he realise?'

'Evidently not. He didn't say much on the telephone, naturally. We spoke French, actually, in case anyone was listening. He wants to come down tomorrow and stay for a bit, till it's all blown over. I said he could. He'd already fixed his leave, you see.'

This was the longest speech that Marjorie had made for nearly two weeks.

'Of course he must come,' Robert said heartily. 'And he can stay for as long as he likes. It'll cheer you up.'

She'd always got on well with Clive; hearing about his troubles would make her forget her own.

Already Marjorie could feel her despair diminishing; now there was something definite ahead.

'Sarah's going away. She means to have the baby adopted. Clive said he'd tell us all about it when he comes.'

And there would be plenty to relate: a revelation of this sort was not an ending; there would be consequences for everyone. It was certain that Clive would help Sarah if he could, until she proved able to assemble the shattered fragments of her life into some sort of shape; the girl might take years to lift herself out of this mess. Marjorie wondered whether, if she had encouraged Sarah to talk more freely over Christmas, this confession might have been wrung from her sooner. Ruth, though, had failed to uncover the ultimate truth; surely there were times when reticence was best?

Marjorie knew that she faced another choice now: whether to challenge Robert about his past association with Ruth, of which she was convinced, or whether to ignore it. If Ruth had not come to Haverbury she would never have discovered it; whether it would have begun again or not, no one could know, but the coincidence

had made anything possible.

What happened next depended on Robert and his intentions. Marjorie must at least give him some chance to put the record straight or to make plain that the past was not important.

He spoke now. His thoughts had been busy too.

'Clive and Sarah were going to Sicily, weren't they? I suppose he's all booked up?'

'I imagine so.'

Would it be considered a scandal if a brother and sister-in-law went on holiday together? Robert had no idea. Surely, under the circumstances, after Marjorie's illness and Clive's romantic upheaval, no one could be malicious enough to think in such terms? It was a possibility to be investigated, anyway. If it could be managed, there would be time for everyone to recover from the various assaults on their emotions, and to evolve a pattern for the future.

'Are you going to have your bath? I was just about to feed Rory,' said Marjorie. 'Shall I get you a drink?'

It was the first effort she had seemed to make. He replied with warmth.

'Yes, please. Then come and talk to me. Tell me what you've been doing all day.'

It was so simple: he was astonished at his own duplicity. Perhaps a prolonged deception would not be hard to manage. Of course, Ruth would have to move away, but not at once; urgency might arouse suspicion. There was no reason why a perfectly discreet arrangement should not be engineered. Marjorie would not be hurt by what she did not know; Ruth could maintain the independence that was by now such a part of her nature; and Robert's own character would remain publicly unblemished.

So he planned the eating and the having of his cake, while Marjorie poured their drinks. They sat by the fire and she told him about her walk with Rory and that Joan had telephoned asking her to lunch on Monday. Now it was his turn for a shock; she prepared to administer it.

'Could I have the car? I'll take you to the station first.'

'Of course you can, darling. Ruth will give me a lift home.'

‘Yes.’ Marjorie did not enquire for Ruth; she had no need to ask. She could not cope with it all quite yet, for some of the puzzle was missing and so much was guesswork, fragments and impressions pieced together in the long hours of the past fortnight as she remembered all that had happened since she had first seen Ruth staring at the house. She would have to come to terms with it all; she would make Clive tell her what she did not already know. He too would be at a low ebb, so that she would compel him. There was no need for any hasty action, but Robert was going to find that she would not be as easy to manipulate as perhaps he thought, nor so dependent.

‘I’m getting a job. Joan knows of one. It’s at the twins’ school,’ she said aloud. ‘I’m going for an interview on Monday, before lunching with Joan. If I get it, I’ll start in May.’ And I will get it, she vowed. She waited for the explosion. None came.

‘Perhaps it would be good for you,’ Robert surprisingly said.

‘Joan thinks so, and I do too,’ said Marjorie. Things had changed now, and Clive must be left with Rory and the regains of Sunday’s joint when she went off; but she would hurry back and they could go for a walk, or even, perhaps, to the cinema, dissipatedly in the middle of the afternoon. She needn’t have asked Robert for the car, since Clive’s would be here. Never mind. Let him have his drive with Ruth. That at least could be made easy for him.

She looked at him and wondered if this was the end. She felt no great hurt; in fact she was not aware of any real emotion except relief at Clive’s escape; here was the one good result of her mischance. And was that, in fact, such a calamity after all, now that she had pulled her ostrich head from its hiding place and faced the truth?

Clive and she could comfort each other in their humiliation, and Robert must make of it what he chose. His was the responsibility; his, too, should be the doubt.

Margaret Yorke is the immensely successful author of *The China Doll, Dead In The Morning, The Apricot Bed* and *Summer Flight,* which are also available from Severn House.